GAMEINFORMER®

+10

GAMEINFORMER
MIRAGE
ASSASSIN'S CREED
MIRAGE

GAMEINFORMER

Single issues of the print magazine are

HYPE

GAMEINFORMER
FINAL FANTASY XVI
A WORLD
A FINAL TOUR OF DIABLO IV'S ENDGAME
BY MARCUS STEWART
GAMEINFORMER
DIABLO IV

now available

Find yours at GameStop.com

EDITOR'S NOTE

DEEP ROOTS

NINTENDO HOLDS A UNIQUE PLACE IN THE GAME INDUSTRY. For many who now have leadership positions at game studios around the world, the early Mario, Zelda, and Metroid games were an entryway into the hobby that would one day become a career. The Nintendo Entertainment System represented a seismic shift in how people engaged with fun in their homes. As such, nostalgia for those early franchises holds a powerful sway for many. The appearance of a major new chapter in one of Nintendo's core franchises is a big deal.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

It's hard to imagine what the video game industry might be like today had it not been for the phenomenon of that video game console. But even before the ubiquitous NES of the 1980s, Nintendo, founded in 1889, had been a functional entertainment company for decades before most of its competitors or other media companies in film and music existed. Just flip to p. 84 for a sense of what was happening when Nintendo rolled out its first playing cards. It's wild to consider how long Nintendo has been in the game.

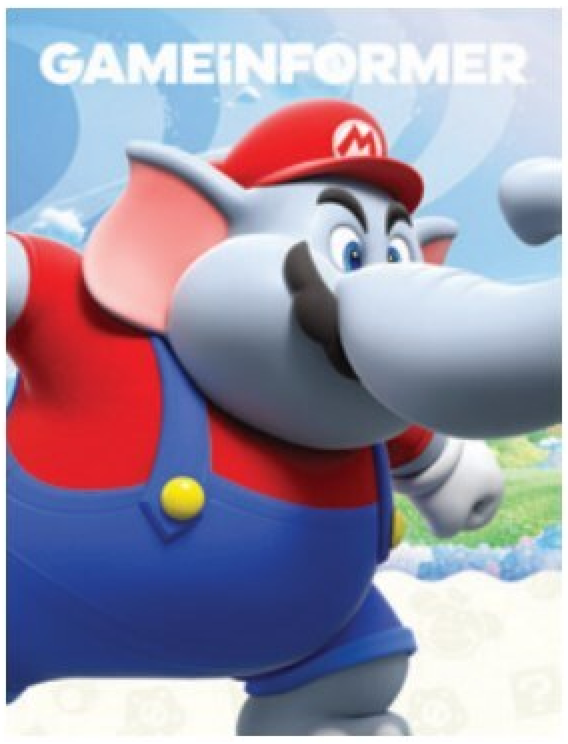
Earlier this spring, Nintendo cemented its claim to a strong year. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom took over the gaming zeitgeist for more than a few weeks, as everyone seemed to be experimenting with wild-engineered devices to transport Link across Hyrule. In addition, Nintendo's other heavy hitter of a franchise managed to win a huge push into mainstream attention; *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* was a massive commercial success, smashing the record for the highest-grossing film based on a video game in a single week.

It's safe to presume that in the wake of that success, a new generation of fans is now plugged into the adventures of Mario and his friends. Super Mario Bros. Wonder is set to arrive as that enthusiasm surges – the first major evolution of Mario's side-scrolling gameplay in a decade.

We had the good fortune to get an early look at the game and have every reason to believe it's shaping up as a standout for the long-running franchise. Filled with creativity, color, and a ceaseless focus on joy, it's one of the games I'm most excited to play in this incredibly crowded year.

We're currently enjoying a golden age of remarkable games from an incredible array of creative voices, but there's still something nostalgic and powerful about a new flagship Nintendo game. We hope you enjoy our look at Mario's latest outing and that our cover story can help enrich your journeys in the Flower Kingdom when the time comes to jump in yourself.

Play well. Be well.



Super Mario Bros. Wonder

One of the main goals Super Mario Bros. Wonder director Shiro Mouri had when creating a new iconic power-up was to make Mario bigger in stature. Our cover art this month highlights Mouri's original vision by plastering a larger-than-life version of Elephant Mario against the picturesque backdrop of the Flower Kingdom.

GAMEINFORMER

Volume XXXIII / Number 9 / Issue 360

Publisher
Mary Lugones

Editor-in-Chief
Matt Miller

Knows how to fall from great heights thanks to skydiving

Magazine Content Director
Kyle Hilliard

Online Content Director
Brian Shea

Senior Associate Editor
Blake Hester

Thinks Aggro Dr1ft looks cool

Associate Editors
Wesley LeBlanc
Marcus Stewart
Charles Harte

Video Editor
Alex Van Aken

Production Director
Margaret Andrews

Has 10 billion hours as Zenyatta in Overwatch

Lead Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web/Graphic Designer
& Programmer
Kristin Williams

Web Designer & Programmer
Jon Woodey

Flew to South Korea for a dance performance

Operations Manager
Sarah Hansen

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

Contributors
Diego Nicolás Argüello
Nico Vergara
Pao Yumol

Our next issue launches digitally on 11/7
with the print edition to follow

For renewal, address change, and
GameStop Pro details:

Web: **gamestop.com/faq**

Email: **care@gamestop.com**

Mail to: **625 Westport Parkway**
Grapevine, TX 76051 • Attn: Guest Care

For additional inquiries:
800-883-8895

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Game Informer® Volume 33 Issue 360 October 2023 (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published monthly except April and December by Sunrise Publications®, 625 Westport Parkway, Grapevine TX 76051. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: 625 Westport Parkway, Grapevine TX 76051. For customer service inquiries call 1-800-883-8895. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. Periodicals postage paid at St Paul, MN 55164-5015 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer®, 625 Westport Parkway Grapevine, TX 76051 Attn: Guest Care. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to (Game Informer®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011).

DISCLAIMER: Companies sometimes send physical or downloadable products for coverage consideration, and may also provide travel or accommodations for events or visits. In such instances, coverage is not guaranteed or promised, and any opinions are formed independently of these considerations.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Charles Harte

Associate Editor

This year has been full of games I've been anticipating for years, but I've been just as impressed playing titles I didn't have on my radar at all. Baldur's Gate 3 and Lies of P are two of my favorite games of 2023, and I didn't pay much attention to either until their respective launches. Being hyped for specific games is fun and exciting, but it can also create a smokescreen for everything else that's out there. I'm amazed by the sheer volume of games released each week, and even more amazed by how many are absolutely worth my time.

Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Graphic Designer

I sometimes think about my past in terms of what video games I was playing at the time. I built a profitable business catching and trading Feebas in Pokémon Sapphire when I was in elementary school. Free MMOs like Fly For Fun were my favorite in middle school. I spent my high school years on Journey, Mass Effect, Fable, Assassin's Creed (the Ezio Trilogy), and Kingdom Hearts. Guild Wars 2, Dragon Age, and Amnesia were the highlight of my college years. Destiny has marked my late twenties. What games do you think of?

Contents

regulars

02 EDITOR'S NOTE // **03** STAFF SPOTLIGHT // **06** REPLIES // **26** GEAR
58 PREVIEWS // **72** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING

spotlight

34 **COVER STORY – SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER**

It's been 11 years since the last proper 2D Mario, but Super Mario Bros. Wonder is nearly here. We played through several courses and spoke with Nintendo luminaries about bringing Mario back to his roots while expanding in new directions.

12 **INFECTIOUS ATTRACTION**

Between remasters, remakes, sequels, and TV shows, The Last of Us refuses to die. It's perhaps fitting, then, that Universal Studios recently brought the series' undead to life for a new attraction. We visited the park and talked to the creators.

20 **GINGER CANDY**

As VR remains prominent in the game industry, we talked to numerous people in QA about the conditions and work involved in testing virtual reality games. Spoilers: expect plenty of motion sickness and vomit.

28 **CHASING CERTAIN DOOM**

Fitting somewhere between nostalgia and progressive game design, boomer shooters have evolved beyond fad into a full-blown genre. We talked to the people behind games like Dusk about where this trend comes from.

80 **A HIGHER DEGREE OF QUALITY**

It's hard to overstate the cultural mindshare the Xbox 360 had on pop culture in the late 2000s and 2010s. Timed with our 360th issue, we decided to look back. This is the story of Microsoft's most successful box.

DISCOVER NEW GAMES
Barbie dreamhouse adventures
Wild Card Football
The Grinch Christmas Adventures
Haunted House
Transformers EarthSpark Expedition
Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 Turbocharged
PAW Patrol World
GET 'EM AT GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org

Replies

WITNESSING GREATNESS

Do you think this is the greatest year for game releases? I'd argue it is. Do you agree? If not, what year is the "greatest" year for game releases? **– via Instagram**

↳ *The general sentiment among gamers (and the* Game Informer *staff) is that 2023 is among the best years we've ever seen. While titles like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, Baldur's Gate 3, and Starfield are perhaps the most memorable releases so far, we've also received other acclaimed titles like Resident Evil 4, Street Fighter 6, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, Hogwarts Legacy, Mortal Kombat 1, Sea of Stars, and Final Fantasy XVI. That's not to mention games still to release as of this writing, including Marvel's Spider-Man 2, Super Mario Bros. Wonder, and Alan Wake 2.*

It's certainly a strong contender for the best year ever, but let's look at the other years it's competing against. Here are some of our picks up to this point, based on U.S. release dates:

***1998** – Baldur's Gate, Crash Bandicoot: Warped, Fallout II, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Metal Gear Solid, Panzer Dragoon Saga, Pokémon Red and Blue, Resident Evil 2, Spyro the Dragon, StarCraft, Tekken 3*

***2007** – Assassin's Creed, BioShock, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Crysis, Forza Motorsport 2, God of War II, Halo 3, Mass Effect, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, Peggle, Pokémon Diamond and Pearl, Portal, Rock Band, Super Mario Galaxy*

***2013** – Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, Battlefield 4, BioShock Infinite, Diablo III, Fire Emblem: Awakening, Gran Turismo 6, Grand Theft Auto V, The Last of Us, The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, Pikmin 3, Rayman Legends, Saints Row IV, Super Mario 3D World, Tomb Raider*

***2017** – Cuphead, Destiny 2, Divinity: Original Sin II, Hollow Knight, Horizon Zero Dawn, Injustice 2, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, Nier: Automata, Persona 5, Sonic Mania, Super Mario Odyssey, Tekken 7, Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, What Remains of Edith Finch, Yakuza 0*

This year definitely stands head and shoulders above most recent years, but is it the best year ever? It's difficult to compare years directly when you must account for different genres of games and varied tastes of those making such declarations. But if 2023 can stick the landing with all its high-profile fall and holiday releases, it will be hard to think of any year topping it.

OUTSIDE OF INTERVIEWS AND GAMEPLAY

What's your favorite part of visiting developers for cover stories? Do you have any favorite developer comments on the magazine? Any friendships made along the way? Do developers read *G.I.* at all? Stuff like that. **– JHerb24 via Discord**

↳ *While we're always there to do a job, there is something undeniably cool about being in the space in which some of the most legendary video games were made. We definitely felt that as we traveled to Capcom's offices in Osaka, Japan, for both our Resident Evil 4 and Street Fighter 6 cover stories over the last year. But even cooler than that is visiting the areas around the studios, sometimes accompanied by developers. In those times, we not only get great recommendations for the local food and sights, but also get to learn more about the people behind the games we're covering.*

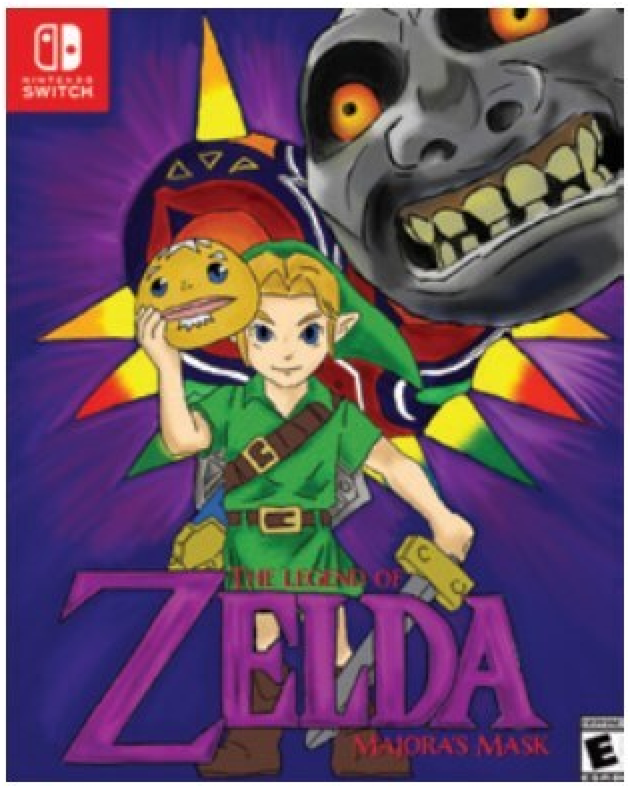
Though many studios are largely comprised of rows of desks and/or cubicles not unlike what you'd find at a typical office, getting the tour and seeing all the obscure relics from the team's past games is always neat. Ones that immediately come to mind are Remedy's underground motion-capture studio, NetherRealm's arcade, Infinity Ward's hallway of Neversoft memorabilia, and Game Freak's near-complete collection of Pokémon figures and games. Nintendo of America even has a store and museum you can only access if accompanied by an employee. And yes, sometimes we spot a familiar issue of Game Informer *from when we featured a game the studio worked on. Many studios also have copies of* Game Informer *issues around the office, which we always appreciate.*

A PURPOSE FULFILLED

I play a lot of board games, and I wanted to thank you for some of the suggestions there. I picked up a copy of Mists over Carcassonne for my nephew when he finished high school thanks to your graduation gift guide, and I liked playing it with him so much I snagged a copy for myself last month.

It's fun seeing the different games and toys in those guides. My girlfriend always complains about shopping for presents for me, so I've started circling stuff in the magazine (usually board games) that I might like, and I think she might actually appreciate the ideas. Fingers crossed! **– Andrew K. via email**

Thank you so much for reading our quarterly buying guides! We put in a lot of work to find the coolest stuff we can recommend to our readers to buy for themselves or someone they care about. We're so happy to hear that you have found them useful in the ever-present struggle of figuring out what to get a loved one for a special occasion. Look forward to our annual Holiday Buying Guide in our next issue!



Reader art submission: Brittany Reynard

Soundoff: Prioritizing Gaming Time

We asked our readers and community how they're prioritizing their gaming time during such a busy holiday season of releases. Here are some of their responses!

Just taking them one game at a time! Plus, games will continually evolve and update, meaning if you pick it up in a few months, it maybe be even better than when it came out. **– via Instagram**

We usually just collapse into ourselves like a dying star trying to keep up with every new game release in the fall. **– via Instagram**

Just Starfield. That's all. **– via Instagram**

I think it's just a matter of whatever my mood is at the time and what games will bring me the most happiness too. **– via Instagram**

Holiday? This *year* has been banger after banger all year long. The holiday actually looks tame after October (at least for my taste). Now, in regards to gaming time, I'm learning as I get older to enjoy the simple life. Find a game I enjoy playing and play it. If five other games I want come out while I spend 150 hours in Zelda, then I'll just be happy someone else is enjoying them. And maybe I'll play it, or maybe I won't. And if I do, it'll probably be on sale by then. Keeping up with all the games is either a young man's game or a fool's errand. **– via Discord**

Join the conversation

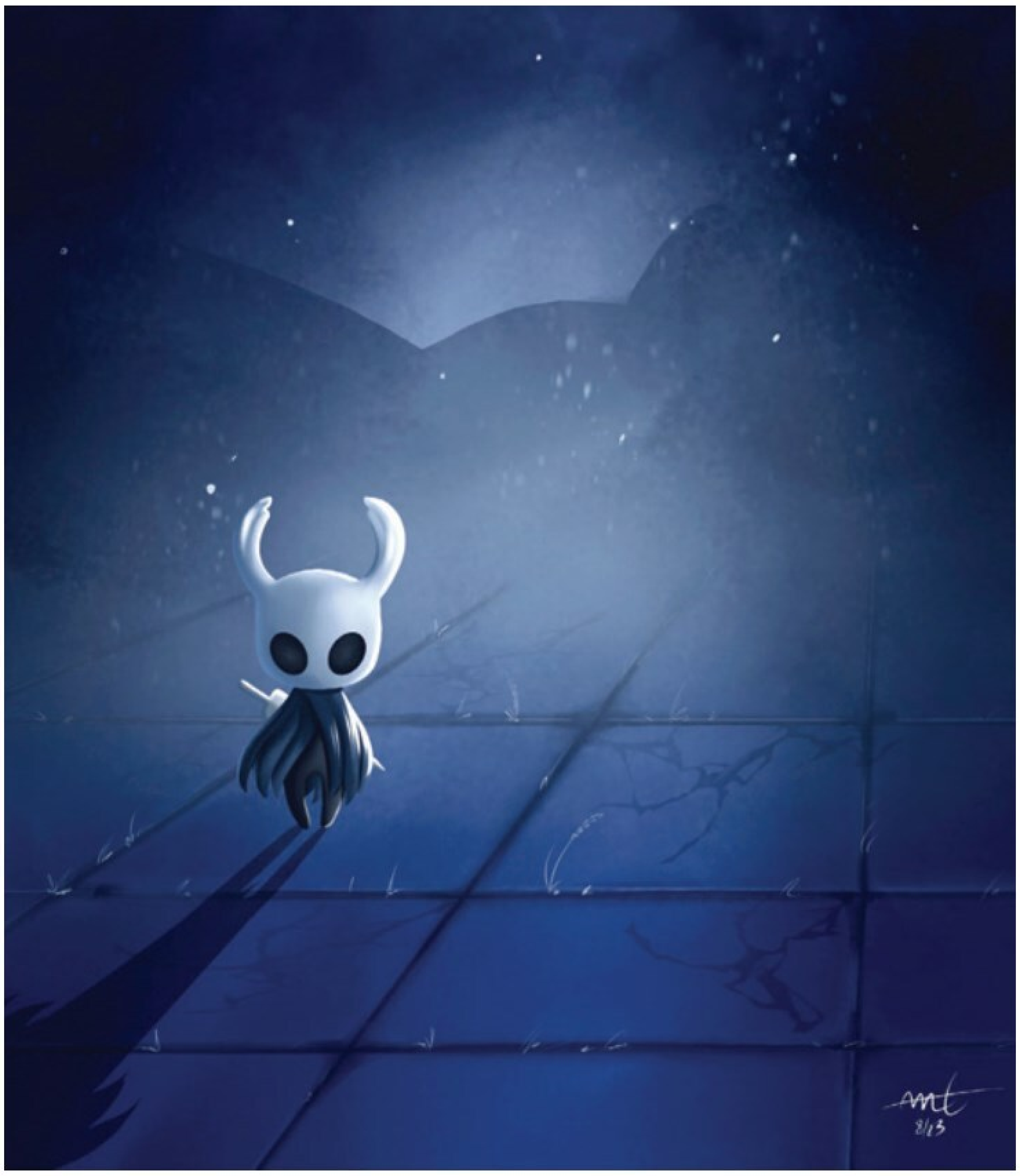
Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

@gameinformer
officialgameinformer
@gameinformermagazine
GameInformer
@game_informer

The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. **Starfield** NEW RELEASE
2. **Sea of Stars** NEW RELEASE
3. **Baldur's Gate 3** ▼
4. **The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom** ▼
5. **Lies of P** NEW RELEASE
6. **Mortal Kombat 1** NEW RELEASE
7. **Armored Core 6** ▲
8. **Street Fighter 6** ▼
9. **Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty** NEW RELEASE
10. **F-Zero 99** NEW RELEASE



Reader art winner: Morgan Turner

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Submitting your artwork grants *Game Informer* authorization to publish the work in our print and/or digital channels, including social media. Please include your name so we can give you credit. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

1.

For this month's cover story, Brian traveled to Redmond, Washington to spend extra time with Super Mario Bros. Wonder. Read all about it in our cover story on p. 34

2.

As part of our cover story conversations, we spent nearly an hour with Super Mario Bros. Wonder director Shiro Mouri and producer Takashi Tezuka

3.

Marcus flew to Los Angeles, California to get extended time with Marvel's Spider-Man 2. Read all about it on p. 58

4.

PAX West is always a great place to spot cosplayers, but Bandai Namco went all out with its cast of cosplayers for many of Tekken 8's playable characters

1

Nintendo
Nintendo of America Inc.

4

TEKKEN 8
FIST MEETS FA
PAX

6

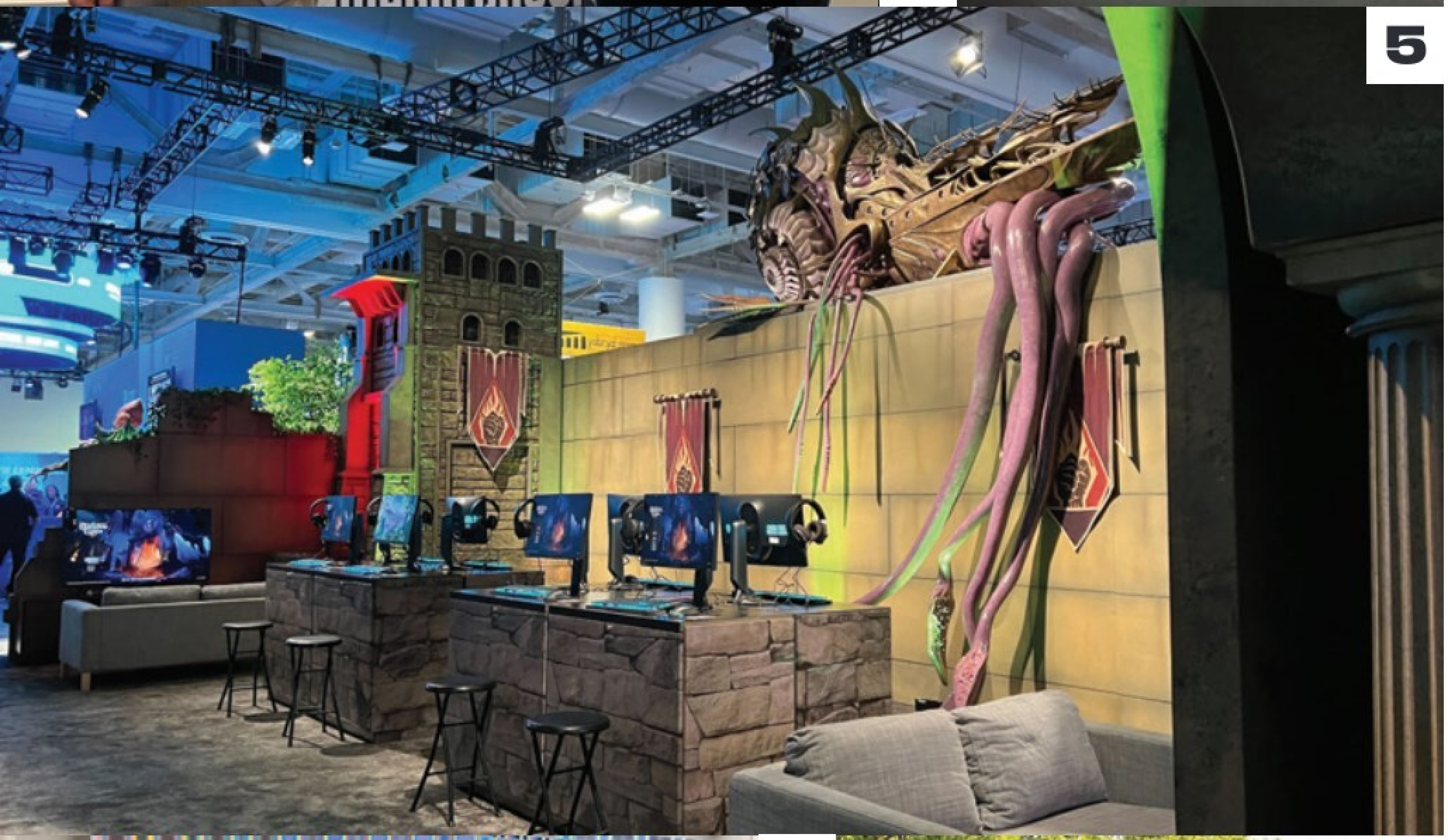
7

NINTENDO SWITCH
SUPER MARIO BROS.

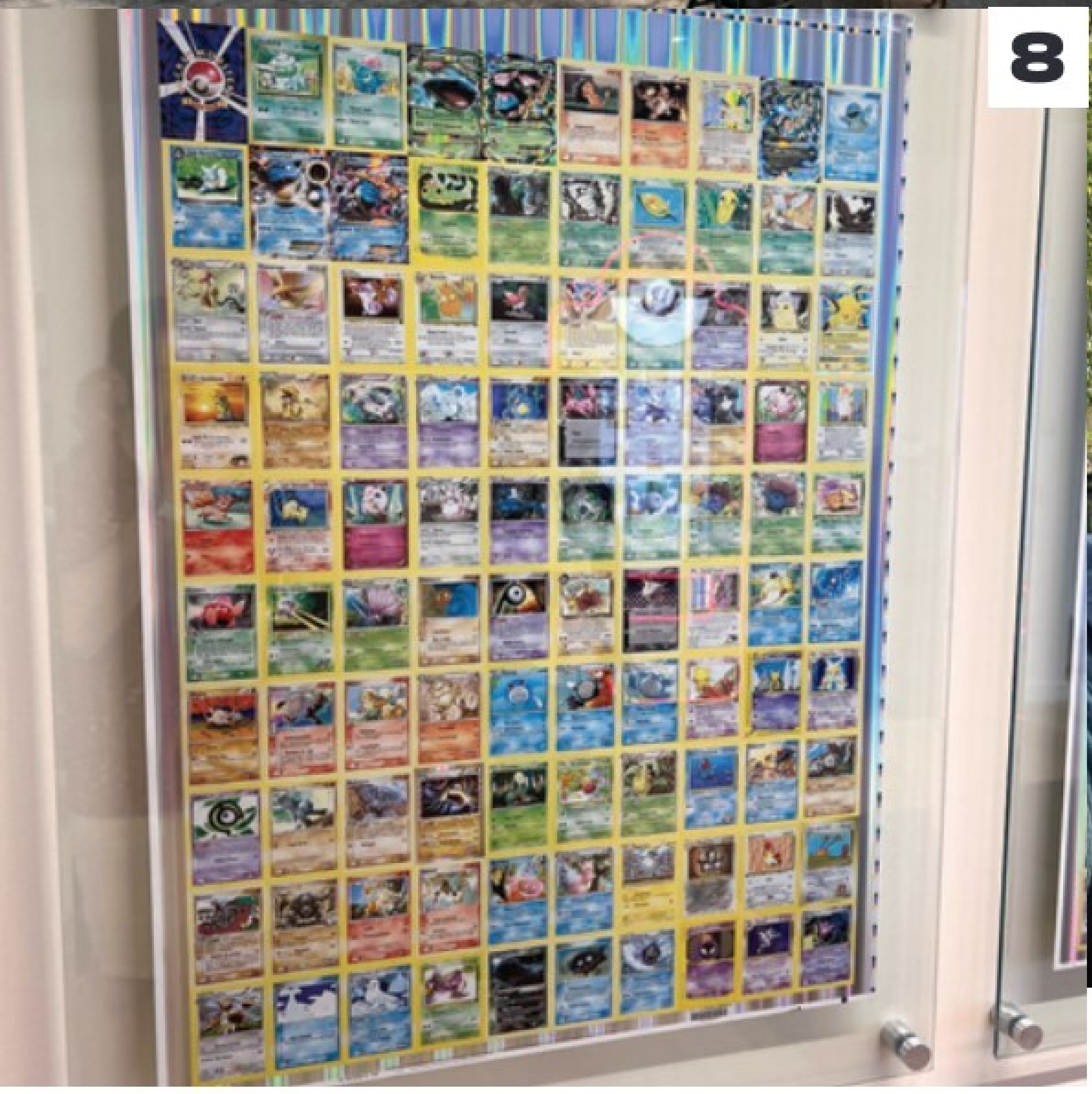
2

MARVEL
SPIDER-MAN 2

3



5



8

9

5.

Larian Studios celebrated its recent smash hit, Baldur's Gate 3, with one of the cooler booths at PAX West this year

6.

While at Nintendo Live 2023, we unexpectedly ran into royalty. Learn more about Nintendo's first official fan fest in North America on p. 10

7.

Detective Pikachu provided a warm welcome to The Pokémon Company International's United States headquarters in Bellevue, Washington

8.

We expected cool Pokémon artifacts aplenty at The Pokémon Company International's U.S. offices – and we weren't let down – but we were still surprised to see uncut sheets of Pokémon cards framed on the walls

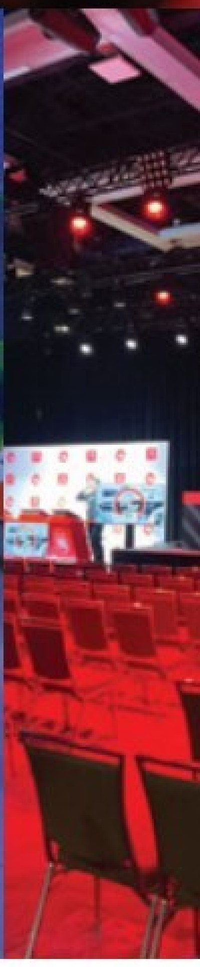
9.

PAX West and Nintendo Live were super busy, but Brian still found time to catch up with hosts of the Kit and Krysta Podcast, Kit Ellis and Krysta Yang ■

Live From Seattle!

Seeing many sights of Nintendo Live, the company's first official fan fest in the United States

BY BRIAN SHEA



THE PHRASE, "THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO BE A FAN" is often used as a marketing talking point for specific games, movies, TV shows, or franchises. However, that phrase might very well apply to the greater fandom landscape, as more fandoms have official gatherings to look forward to than ever before. Early conventions like San Diego Comic-Con were just the start, as events have grown to include consumer-wide shows like PAX, genre-specific gatherings like Evo, and even game-specific conventions like Final Fantasy XIV Fan Festival and Warframe's TennoCon.

Nintendo is the latest company to invite its fans to celebrate their love for the company and its games. Following a 2022 debut in Tokyo, Japan, Nintendo Live 2023 took place in Seattle, Washington, from September 1 to 4, allowing fans to descend upon the Seattle Convention Center and nerd out over their favorite Nintendo games, characters, and franchises.

"It is a celebration to say thank you and a moment to bring all ages – Nintendo for all – together to celebrate and experience what makes Nintendo so special to so many fans in so many different ways," Nintendo vice president of consumer marketing Jim Urbaitis says.

People from different ages, backgrounds, and walks of life could be spotted enjoying Nintendo Live throughout the convention's four-day stretch. Some people dressed up in nice clothes and took in the sights and sounds alone, while others walked around in full cosplay with their families. The unifying factor is they have a love for Nintendo in one way or another; as I walked the show floor, the enthusiasm was infectious.

Whether exploring a replica of Animal Crossing Island, taking photos with the mascot characters walking around the show, or watching competitive Super Smash Bros. Ultimate matches on the NintendoVS stage, the entire Nintendo Live experience emanated energy at every turn. Nintendo even re-created an '80s-style living room, complete with a yellow landline telephone, tube television set, and tower speakers.

"If you think about the full range, the broad spectrum of opportunities and things to do at Nintendo Live, there's the nostalgia factor for someone like me," Urbaitis says. "And then right across the hall is The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, it's just such a fun experience."

Attendees could line up to play the latest games in Nintendo's library, including Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, Splatoon 3, and Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, but the big surprise when the doors opened on the first day was that attendees could be the first members of the public to get their hands on Super Mario Bros. Wonder. Nintendo kept this a closely guarded secret, so it was a genuine surprise.

"We spend a lot of time thinking about the best ways to deliver smiles and surprise-and-delight moments," Urbaitis says. "Super Mario Bros. Wonder was one of those surprise-and-delight moments. The reality is the doors open, and the fans didn't really know what to expect at all. We have the honor and the pleasure of thinking through, 'What would a fan like the most?' We created an experience that allows fans of all ages."

Fans could also take videos of themselves running away from a giant 14-foot-tall Lego Bowser, visit a small museum of Pokémon games and their respective platforms, or leave their mark on the Splatoon 3 coloring wall. But the highlight of the Nintendo Live experience was the daily musical performances. Each day, seasoned conductor James Olmstead led the 18-piece Super Mario Super Big Band and the 50-piece Legend of Zelda Orchestra. Seeing some of the most iconic and beloved songs from the full spectrum of these franchises' games brought to life through these masterful performances is something I don't imagine I'll soon forget.

In true fan-fest fashion, Nintendo offered up a load of merchandise players could purchase.

The Legend of ZELDA

THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
TEARS OF THE KINGDOM
Atrium Lobby
Men
NINTENDO SWITCH

Unfortunately, it had the longest line of the show, with wait times stretching past the three-hour mark at times. Thankfully, all the items at the show (save for a couple of shirts and a special gold-colored *Super Mario Bros. Movie* soundtrack vinyl) could also be purchased online, so if you wanted to skip the line, you could still get most of what you wanted.

Despite that hiccup, Nintendo Live did so much right with its first attempt at bringing its fan fest to the United States. Still, the company plans to evaluate and react to the results, as well as what attendees say. "We will spend a lot of time listening to feedback, whether that's social media or listening [...] over the weekend, and then we'll look at what is the best opportunity in the future to generate those smiles to give thanks to the fans, and we'll figure out what that looks like," Urbaitis says.

With the Switch outselling every Nintendo home console ever made, The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom serving as one of the highest-rated games of 2023, Super Nintendo World continuing to roll out to new Universal Studios locations, and *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* becoming one of the highest-grossing animated films ever released, Nintendo's 2023 has already been one of its strongest years yet. Now, with the company venturing into the realm of live fan events, Nintendo continues its hot streak of delivering experiences that few, if any, can. ■

For a glimpse into what could very well be the next big hit for Nintendo, be sure to check out our in-depth cover story on Super Mario Bros. Wonder on p. 34

INFECTIOUS ATTRACTION

Exploring The Last of Us' Halloween Horror Nights House at Universal Orlando

BY MARCUS STEWART

IT'S THE RAIN-SOAKED OPENING of Halloween Horror Nights at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, and despite a torrential downpour literally dampening the festivities as gates open to the public, the mood retains an air of excitement, anxiety, and, for some, outright terror. The annual event attracts thousands of horror and theme park enthusiasts every September to experience a park that transforms into a twisted, macabre version of itself at dusk all the way up to Halloween.

Actors donning terrifying costumes stalk the now foggy, puddle-ridden streets, lunging randomly at passersby and eliciting plenty of surprised shrieks. There are several elaborate haunted houses based

on original IP and popular licenses, serving as the main course for masochistic fans who endure long waits – upwards of two hours. One new house has attracted the largest concentration of fans by far, like curious moths to a shining beacon of horror. It's not the houses based on *Chucky*, *The Exorcist: Believer*, or even the popular fourth season of *Stranger Things.* It's The Last of Us, and I'm on my way to experience a recreation of one of my favorite games of all time.

Rewind many hours before, and I'm waiting in Universal's backlot to take a guided tour through the new Last of Us attraction. It's around 11:00 a.m., and the sun is oppressively bright and hot with no signs of the storm to come. I'm led to the front of the attraction's facade: a large, black warehouse with the game's logo towering alongside protagonists Joel and Ellie – and the giant face of a Clicker for good measure.

The heavy doors swing open, and out step the two masterminds behind the attraction: Mike Aiello, Universal's senior director of entertainment creative development, and Neil Druckmann, Naughty Dog president and creative director/writer of The Last of Us.

Speaking with both designers, they told me the seeds for this house were planted around the same time. Druckmann is a massive Halloween Horror Nights fan and tells me he attended his first event while developing The Last of Us. Aiello, who has helped bring HHN to life for two decades, loves the games and immediately saw the potential for an attraction while playing the first entry.

"I remember playing the game...I turned to my wife and go, 'This would be the most amazing haunted house experience,'" says Aiello. "So even 10 years ago, I was already trying to think about, if ever the chance had happened, how would we create that?"

It turned out fans had the same idea. During HHN season a few years ago, Druckmann received messages on Twitter from fans saying how fitting a The Last of Us horror house would be. Druckmann agreed and took a swing by posting a tweet expressing his interest in the hopes of igniting a conversation. It didn't take long; Aiello messaged him only a few hours later, asking to make it happen.

When choosing an IP to adapt, Aiello says it needs two things: a variety of characters and environments. As a video game, The Last of Us certainly fits, with Aiello calling the franchise "an embarrassment of riches" in terms of elements to pull from. Its large, memorable cast, a slew of creative and recognizable enemies, and multiple destinations across its destroyed U.S. offer plenty of paints for Aiello's canvas. But the game's level design has always lent itself well to an amusement park attraction, according to Druckmann. Having studied theme park design in school, he applied those lessons to the game's wide linear design, pacing out the game's quieter moments of exploration and tension-building with its jump scares and action sequences.

Halloween Horror Night houses follow a general blueprint. They're highly detailed, spooky arenas of claustrophobic corridors laden with costumed performers (a.k.a. scare actors) leaping from hiding places to scare attendees. Some performers wait behind curtains, mirrors, or in large cubby holes. Others are placed in plain sight, making you nervously question whether they're real and how or if they'll react when you pass by them. Each house features unique thematic or structural twists, but they're more or less cut from the same cloth.

As a franchise that balances horror and action with the tender, quieter moments of its two protagonists, Druckmann believes that helps The Last of Us stand out from the pack.

"I think that you have to have the horror element, you have to have the tension, you have the fear," says Druckmann. "But beyond that is, again, these core main characters that you're following and are invested in; that combination, I feel, makes this ride quite unique and special."

The Last of Us house is based on the first video game (and only the game, so don't expect any HBO references), with attendees following Joel and Ellie as they make their way through the ruined remains of Pittsburgh. According to Aiello, outside of some initial brainstorming between Naughty Dog and Universal, his team was largely free to develop its own ideas for the house's story and design, with Naughty Dog only providing reference material and refining certain details along the way. Since he's such a fan of the event, Druckmann says he didn't want to micromanage every detail and trusted the experts to do what they do best. It helps that the team responsible has immense reverence for the source material.

"Our show director is Nate Stevenson. He's probably the biggest Last of Us fan on our creative team," says Aiello. "The minute we knew we were doing it, he was the first one in line going, 'Uh, I have to do this. Like, you can't say no.'"

That fandom is immediately evident once I step inside the house. The first room packs plenty of post-apocalyptic detail. Modeled after a ruined city square, shattered concrete abound, and copious signs – all taken straight from the game – decorate the area. My eyes immediately dart to a pick-up truck, once driven by Joel and Ellie, smashed headfirst into a pillar on my right. It's a real working vehicle that Universal pulverized for authenticity. "We didn't even ask them to do that," Druckmann laughs. An actor portraying Joel hides in a nearby corner, pistol ready, ushering us forward while providing cover fire from nearby enemies.

Look-alike actors perform the two heroes during specific moments. While their costumes are convincing, they're truly brought to life thanks to new dialogue recorded by Joel and Ellie's original performers, Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson. Being HHN fans themselves, Druckmann says getting them back in the booth was an easy pitch. Universal took first pass on writing their dialogue before Druckmann rewrote their work in the characters' voices. Along the way, I heard a silhouette of Joel growl, "Spores. Masks up," as I trekked down a fungus-covered hallway while spore-like flakes rained from above. In one intense moment, Ellie repeatedly screamed, "Die, motherf****r!" as she unloaded rifle rounds right in front of me. Hearing these familiar voices adds to the attraction's faithful atmosphere.

The sound design was also a treat. Gustavo Santaolalla's iconic score plays, changing throughout the adventure and swelling to a big crescendo at the end. Entering dark areas and hearing the familiar call of Clickers from seemingly all around me had me on my toes for a surprise jump scare at any angle.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

When they do appear, the make-up and costumes impressed – especially the much-larger Bloaters. One room had a couple of infected, one mannequin and one live performer, swaying mindlessly until one of them lashed out at me (I won't spoil which). As creepy as that all sounds, I wouldn't say the house truly terrified me. Much of that is due to being enamored with the sheer amount of details and Easter eggs hidden through the level.

During my journey, I spotted small crawl spaces Ellie would squeeze into, a replica of the workbench, and even recreations of key visual moments from the games. Two standouts include a lore note from Ish, a survivor who once oversaw a thriving sewer community, and the familiar pile of blanketed dead bodies with the, "They didn't suffer" message painted at their feet. I didn't find every reference I was told was present, nor would I spoil them here if I did.

It may not have scared my pants off, but The Last of Us house still immersed me in its world, enthralling me on the one hand and effectively reinforcing how awful it would be to live in its universe on the other. Naughty Dog and Universal are very pleased with how it turned out, and hopefully, it will lead to another collaboration (perhaps a house based on Part II) down the line.

"This was the most massive passion project we could have taken on this year," says Aiello. "We're really proud of the work the team has done. We're so proud of working alongside Neil and his team."

Druckmman sums up his satisfaction more succinctly, "This is better than I could have ever hoped." ■

HEY DIDN
SUFFER

TOP FIVE

ELEPHANTS IN VIDEO GAMES

Mario's new trunk-touting power-up has us reminiscing about other iconic elephants across video game history. Here are five of our favorites

BY CHARLES HARTE

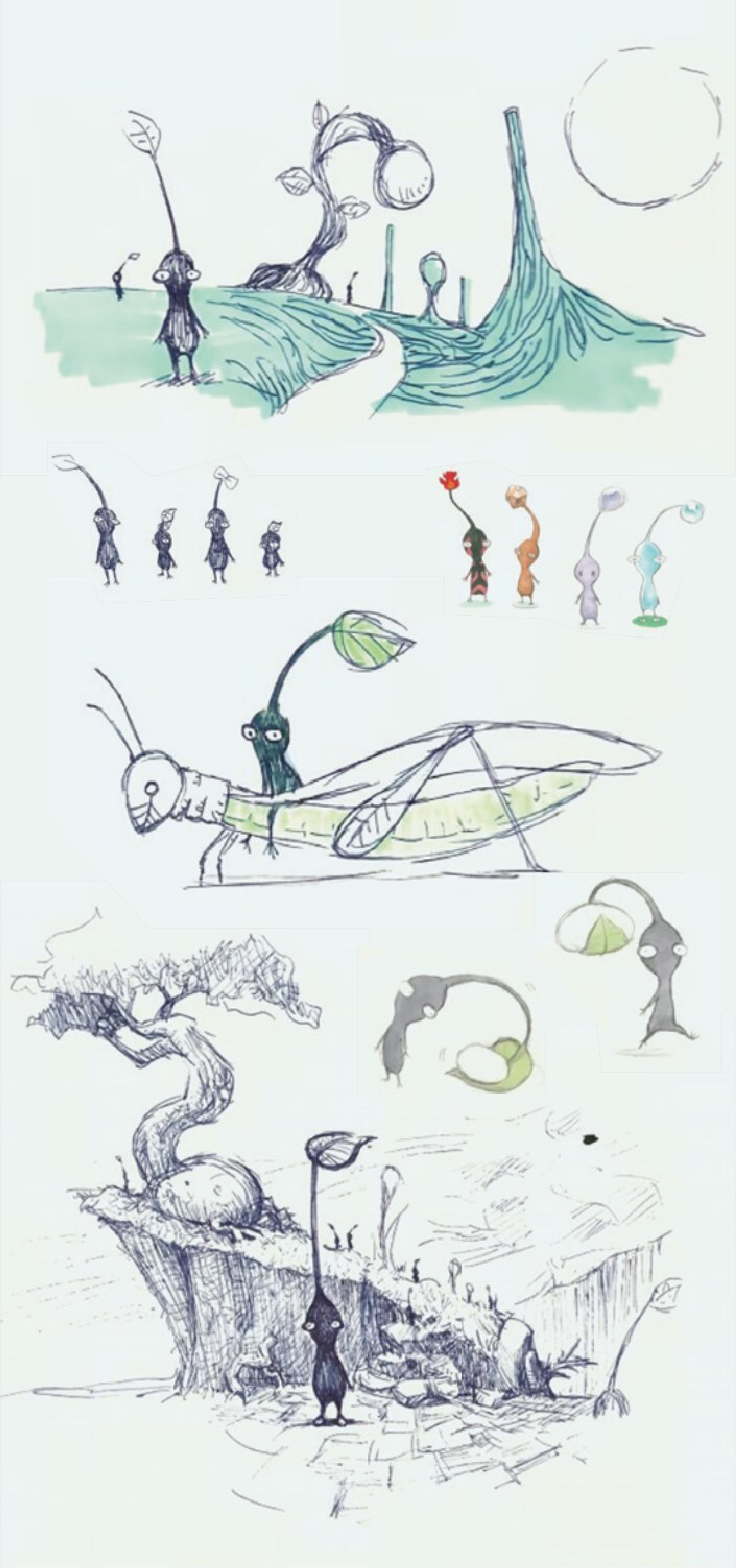
1 Even though she's an adorable, child-like stuffed elephant, **Cutie** was doomed to a comically brutal fate. As one of the most memorable characters from It Takes Two, Cutie earns a spot on this list mostly because we feel bad for her.

2 Pokémon can be based on all kinds of things, but some of the best – like ground-type elephant **Phanpy** – are simply based on animals. With a cute baby blue design and a formidable evolution in Donphan, it can't help but "rollout" its way into our hearts.

3 Of all the Divine Beasts, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild's **Vah Ruta** stands out. Its water-spewing trunk not only showered Zora's Domain with a century of rain – it created a physics puzzle that was the core of one of the most iconic dungeons of the game.

4 An animal so cool that they put the word "badass" in the title of his game, **Tembo the Badass Elephant** is a one-elephant army with a name inspired by '80s action hero Rambo. As round as he is radical, Tembo is the second Game Freak elephant to make our list.

5 What do you get when you mix the world's largest land animal with the might of the Persian army? The **War Elephant**, a cavalry unit so tough that an official Forgotten Empires blog called them "the beefiest, strongest and tankiest units of them all." ■



← Early concept art for the original Pikmin

AFTERWORDS

PIKMIN 4

THE PIKMIN SERIES HAS ALWAYS BEEN WELL-LIKED, but even with its solid track record, Pikmin 4 surprised us with its quality. To get some insight into how the game came together and learn about working with Shigeru Miyamoto, we spoke with chief and programming director Yuji Kando and planning director Yutaka Hiramuki over email. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

Each Pikmin game feels more and more like it is taking place on Earth or a version of Earth. What is the intent behind making the games feel less alien with every entry?

Hiramuki: Well, while it's true that the planet is very similar to the Earth we know, I want to clarify that we have never actually referred to it as "Earth."

Kando: In this game, we wanted to make the Pikmin feel more realistic. For that reason, we added many elements that are familiar to players. But on the other hand, I believe we were able to also widen the gap in values between the player and the aliens.

Also, with the appearance of many aliens other than Hocotatian and Koppaite, as well as the depiction of new technology, I think we, in fact, expanded on the game's element of "outer space" beyond what players already know and feel about Earth or any similar planet.

Pikmin has a subtle darkness to it where you are essentially defeating enemies and dragging their corpses to your ship to turn them into fuel. How do you approach the balance of light and dark?

Kando: One of the themes of this game is the depiction of realistic living creatures, not fantasy, so I think it is inevitable that the game feels that way.

In nature, it's not about which side is the enemy and which side is the ally because, from one perspective, something can be seen as light, but from another, it can be seen as dark. Since the first series title, these perspectives have been important to us, and we also aim for a design that is both cute and creepy and try to be ambiguous about the intentions of the Pikmin.

Hiramuki: Olimar also mentions this in the game, but it may be that the idea of Pikmin being allies is just a convenient assumption when in actuality, us humans (the players) are the ones being played by them.

Do you have an example of strange feedback from Mario, Zelda, and Pikmin creator Shigeru Miyamoto? How do you feel about working with a legend?

Kando: I always feel honored to be able to work with Mr. Miyamoto. With that said, I hope people don't take this the wrong way, but we don't work on a game with the goal of "to make Mr. Miyamoto happy."

The important thing is how deep of a discussion we can have about the game, and those discussions are the times when we see how thoroughly we thought through the game design. So, in that sense, yes, we do get nervous going into a discussion with Mr. Miyamoto.

Do you think Oatchi from Pikmin 4 and Poochy from Yoshi's Island would get along? Has development already begun on a game starring the pair?

Hiramuki: Ha! Oatchi wasn't designed with Poochy in mind, so that thought never crossed my mind until you mentioned it just now. ■

You can find the full, unabridged interview on GameInformer.com

OPINION

Stared At From Across The Abyss

Silent Hill 2 scares more with less, even 20 years later

BY BLAKE HESTER

Includes spoilers for Silent Hill 2.

James Sunderland is not going to survive this trip to Silent Hill.

By the end of his journey, everything will be chaos – his mind and even the world around him, a violent cacophony of anguish.

But in the beginning, it's silent. The kind of quiet that's deafening, where you hear your pulse in your ears, and every tiny sound becomes the worst thing you can imagine.

The opening hour of Silent Hill 2 is – without question – the scariest thing I have ever played. Which, taken at face value, might seem a bit ridiculous. Your goal is simply to navigate James through a dilapidated apartment building. At most, you'll face 10 enemies throughout the building's three floors, but they hardly pose a threat; they're easily avoided or killed. Gameplay primarily consists of walking up to each door in the building and trying to enter; more often than not, they're locked. There's a boss battle at the end, but it's on a timer; you can just run around until it ends. It's tedious by design.

And yet, it's that damn silence that wears on you as a player. The vacuum of sound leaves enough room that you start to imagine hearing things – or worse, the game has random sound effects that mess with you, such as whispers in rooms that may or may not play, depending on your playthrough.

Within this silence, I started to become my worst enemy. James' footsteps sounded like anvils falling on the wooden floor. I imagined he was walking too loudly. That someone would hear him and come after us – a mechanic that does not actually exist in the game. In the moments Silent Hill 2 decides to break the silence – whether via the game's score or, heaven forbid, a monster's footsteps or cry- I was so on edge that I would often pause the game and then work to build up the courage to continue.

Visually, the game plays similar tricks. For one, the apartment is capital-D Dark. You have a flashlight, but beyond that narrow cone of illumination, the rest of the hallways might as well be the endless abyss of outer space. Seeing the faint movements of a monster right beyond the light's cone of vision, just barely discernable, is enough to make my blood run cold. That this isn't happening repeatedly – it's a game with a lot of downtime compared to, say, Resident Evil – makes each time there is something in the dark all the scarier.

Of course, the apartments are full of very overt, graphic visual scares; for example, Silent Hill mainstay Pyramid Head's introduction is here. The scene is so horrific that I can't describe it in a family-friendly magazine. But the normalcy of these apartments is the scariest element of the entire game.

The best way to think about the gameplay in Silent Hill 2 is to understand that it is, in fact, the narrative; the world is a visual representation of James' mental well-being or lack thereof. By the final third, the world has wholly fractured; the architecture and level layout no longer make sense, as it mirrors James' guilt.

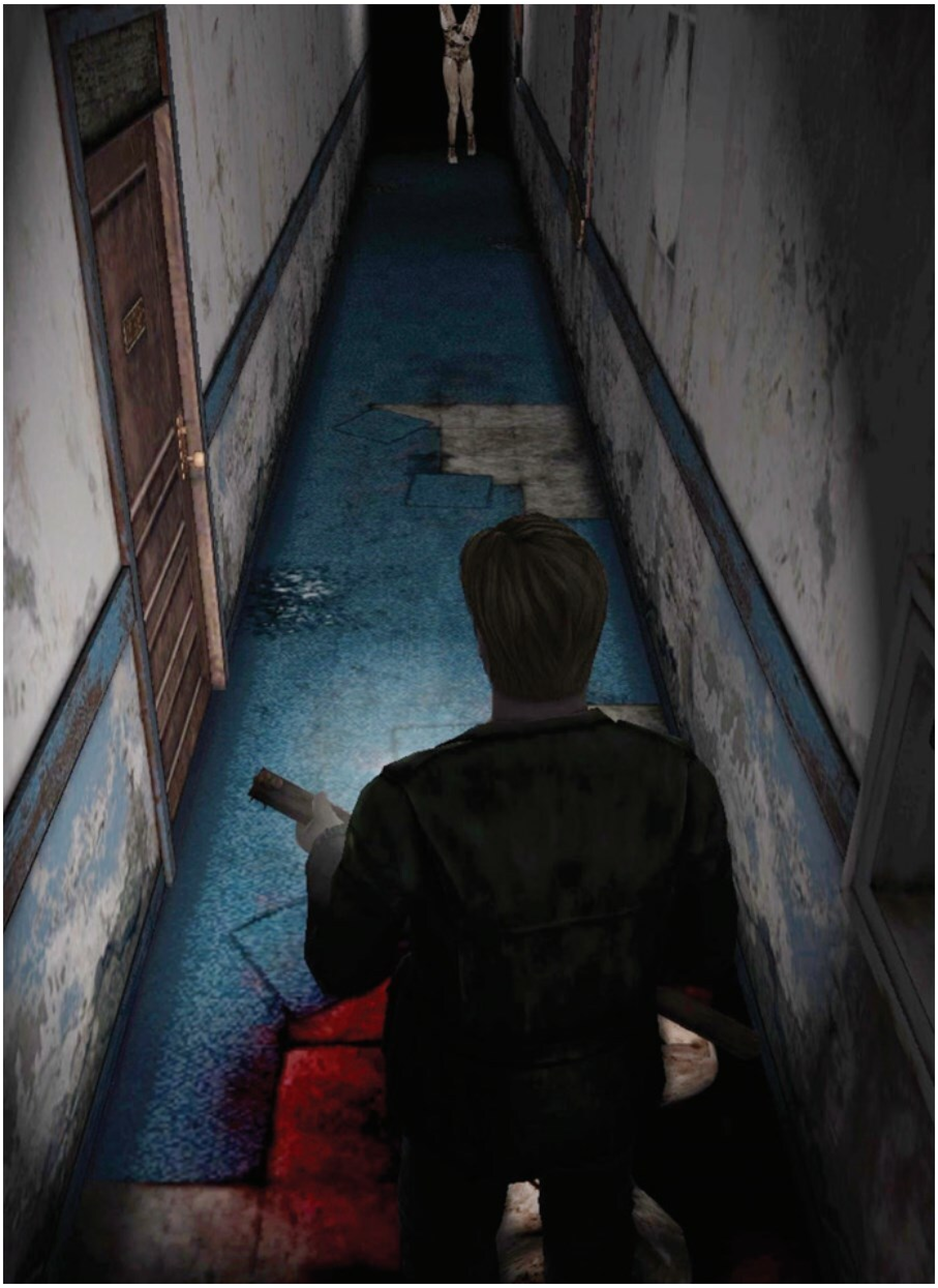
But in the beginning, in these apartments, James is still somewhat oblivious to why he's in Silent Hill. As such, the apartment layout makes sense. It feels like an apartment building you lived in at some point. Architecturally, there are few surprises. But the lack of humanity makes the whole thing feel wrong.

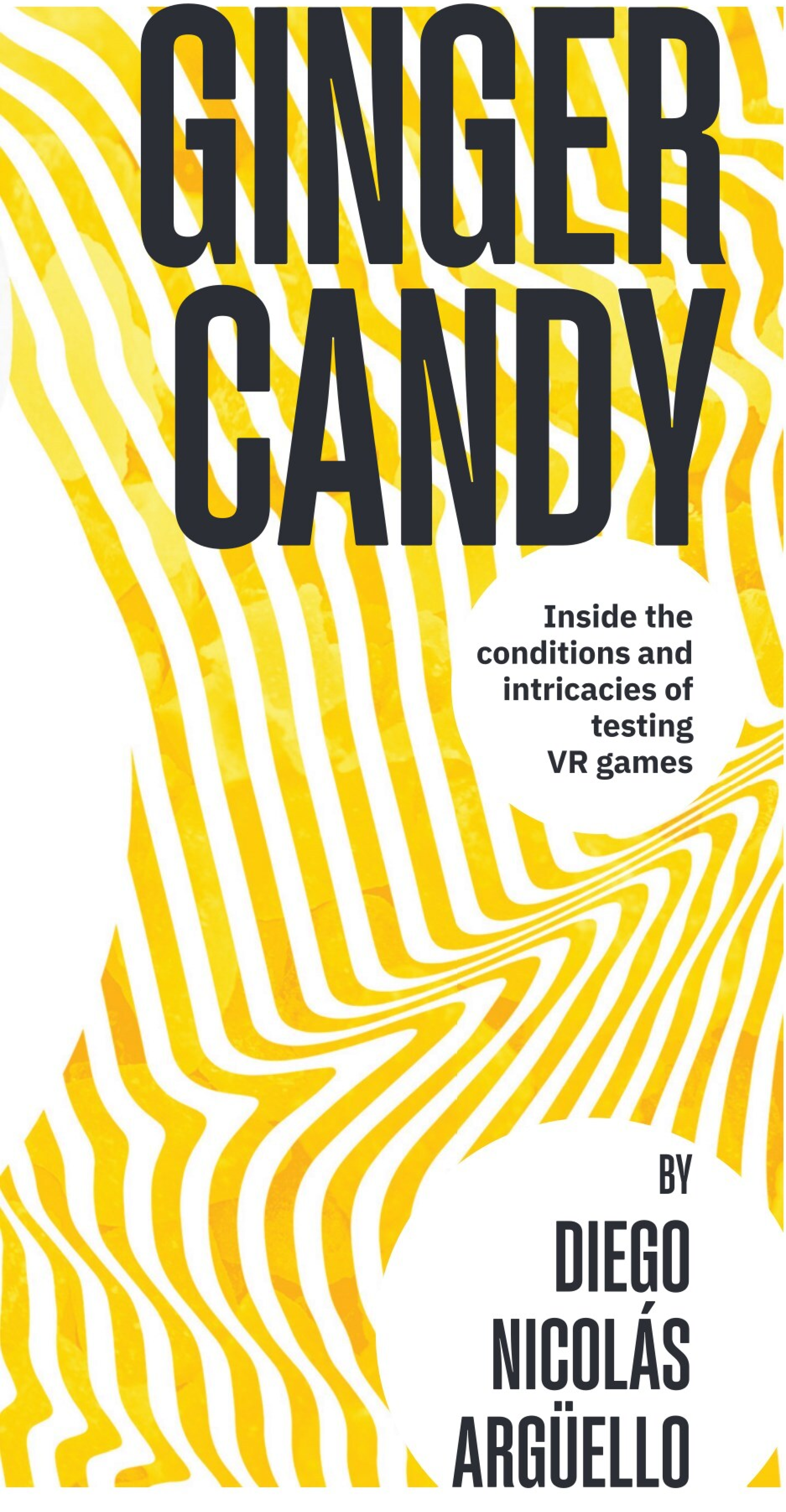
Let's return to the silence. Imagine walking down a hallway in any apartment building – what do you hear? Televisions, people talking, the sounds of moving around beyond the doors. You hear life. When you remove those sounds we're accustomed to, when a place synonymous with being full of people suddenly has its humanity taken away, it no longer makes sense to our brains. You don't need 100 monsters to make this apartment scary. All you need is the eerie void of humanity. It's the same reason it's scary to be inside your work office alone – this space wasn't built to be empty. And when Silent Hill 2 finally decides to break that silence with an actual scare, your nerves are already so frayed that it barely has to do anything to break you completely.

It is, truly, a masterclass of horror, operating on multiple levels to put you, the player, on edge. Most importantly, it's subtle. Many horror games – Dead Space and Resident Evil are prime examples – operate on excessiveness. That approach is only scary to a point. I've always thought the scariest parts of those games were the first 30 minutes and then no moment after. On the contrary, Silent Hill 2 makes you wallow in silence and dread so that by the time it finally breaks in its final third, and the whole thing becomes a cacophonous nightmare, the sound is overwhelming. It never gave you a moment to get used to its scares, so when it turns to excess, you're not prepared, accustomed, or jaded by it.

Silent Hill 2 is largely inaccessible now – at least through legal means. You can play the HD remaster, but technical issues have caused the fanbase to largely disregard it. Original copies can cost upwards of $150. But I genuinely can't recommend it enough if you can get your hands on it. There's truly nothing else like it. Bloober Team, developer of Layers of Fear, The Medium, and so on, is developing a remake. There's plenty of reason to be wary; the developer has a bad history of handling sensitive stories, and Silent Hill 2 is full of troubling themes that require a cautious hand. Nevertheless, whenever that's released, hopefully, it can give new players a glimpse of the original's horror.

Just don't lose yourself in the silence. ■





GINGER CANDY

Inside the conditions and intricacies of testing VR games

BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

Climbing a skyscraper for the 25th time in a day quickly erodes the novelty of virtual reality.

For over three years, Attila Kardos was one of the quality assurance testers at PlayStation London Studios. During his tenure, he worked on first-party behemoths like God of War, Horizon: Zero Dawn, and Detroit: Become Human. But today, he's talking about a different type of testing involving a headset and physically mimicking movements for multiple hours at your office desk.

In games like Blood & Truth, where you take a starring role in action movie-esque setpieces, the fun factor of virtual reality quickly makes itself apparent. However, experiences like this can be taxing. A player can stop at any time. A tester doesn't have that luxury. It doesn't take long for the monotonous physical effort to take a toll. And then they have to show up at work the next day and do it all again.

"Eventually, you start feeling your shoulders," Kardos laughs. "You feel the extra muscle pain."

On average, he spent five to six hours a day in VR. He says it was "pretty intense," to the extent that some colleagues asked management to swap to non-VR projects. Eventually, Kardos got acclimatized to working in virtual reality and recalls the experience fondly. However, during the first two weeks, he'd often feel "detached from reality" whenever he moved his head around after clocking out from work.

As companies continue to iterate on past foundations or release new platforms altogether, from PlayStation to Apple, VR is constantly innovating. But the work conditions for QA folks who learn the inside out of these technologies rarely are. *Game Informer* spoke to testers, artists, and engineers who worked on VR games like Beat Saber, Job Simulator, Cosmonious High, Resident Evil 4 VR, and Blood & Truth about the differences with regular testing, how elements like physicality and hygiene come into play, unorthodox workarounds, and the unsung tradition of ginger candy.

Job Simulator

Into Another Dimension

VR leaping into the mainstream meant new considerations for game development. And, as a consequence, testing. In order to understand the differences with traditional QA practices, it's important to look back at the technology's origins to understand how impactful of a precedent it would set.

Few studios have the institutional knowledge of Owlchemy Labs. Based in Austin, Texas, the team began experimenting with the technology when the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift were only prototypes. There was no documentation or beginner's manual. As promising as this empty virtual canvas was, it was a long time until the studio saw that potential materialized. "We had a very early headset that would shock you if you touched it on the wrong part of the circuit board," says Graeme Borland, gameplay director at Owlchemy since 2013. "[It was] that level of true prototype."

Multiple new considerations quickly came into play. Comfort, both inside and outside the headset, was paramount. As a principle, it intertwined with everything: locomotion methods, figuring out how elements like framerate and draw distances could make or break the experience, and the fact that visual bugs could lead to immediate discomfort.

During the first few years of the main headset companies, trial and error and experimentation led to different ideas. Unlike Owlchemy's Job Simulator, which had sold over a million copies by 2020, not every early project managed to successfully combine its ideas with this emerging technology. Such was the case of Rigs: Mechanized Combat League, developed by Guerrilla Cambridge and published by Sony.

Rift

"It was the first version of PlayStation VR, so we had resolution problems, sweaty eyes, everything was very fresh," Kardos says. Rigs was his first project. In it, you're sitting in the cockpit of a mech – the movement of the robot's head, and as a result, your view direction, was controlled with the VR headset, while the body relied on the controller. Kardos thinks that's one of the things that compromised the end result, as it was "absolutely dreadful" to run around and fight in arenas. As a fast-paced shooter with multiplayer modes, there were many things happening on screen at all times. It didn't take long to feel dizzy.

According to Kardos, there was a market research report dictating that "there are not many people interested in these kinds of games." Initial feedback was fairly rough, too, pinpointing the complicated control scheme and proneness to motion sickness as weak points. Sony closed Guerilla Cambridge in 2017, a year after Rigs' release.

Go Move

In terms of the testing itself, most of the regular QA processes are compatible. Tasks such as bug reports or running test cases – checklists of specific elements to test in different environments – largely apply to VR. The problem is that even mundane actions such as switching to a second monitor to take notes or sending a Slack message turn cumbersome.

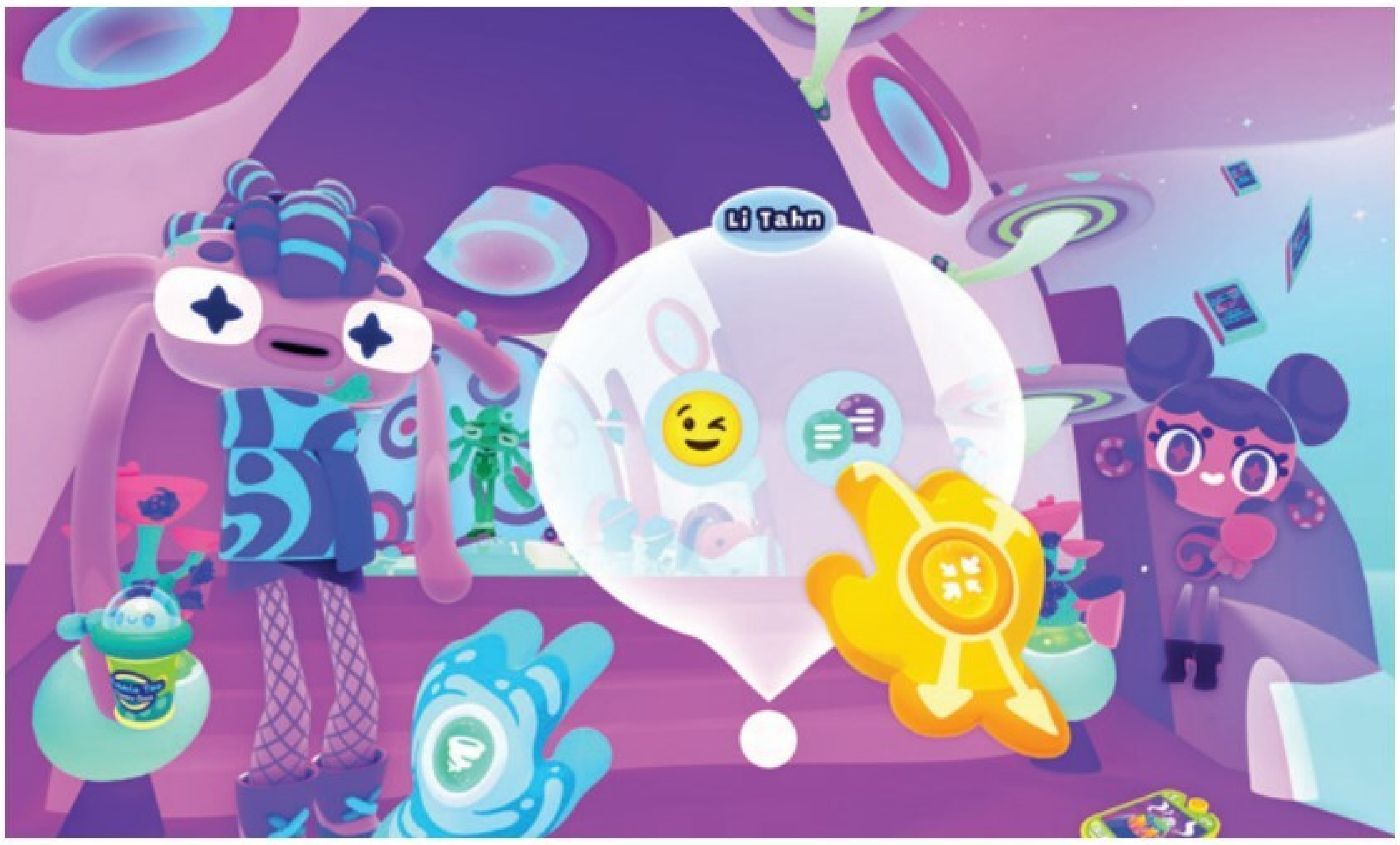
Both Borland and Ben Hopkins, principal graphics engineer at Owlchemy, reinforce that the human experience of being inside a game is a significant factor of developing for VR. To try and mitigate constant usage of the headset, the team implemented a debug system, which essentially allows them to play the game with mouse and keyboard. "It's good for a fast iteration, but there are so many things you can't actually understand whether they work or not unless you're actually in the headset," he says.

When asking the QA testers at Owlchemy if they ever use the debug editor, they reply with laughter. “The approach is very different,” says Jessica Fly, senior QA specialist. Previously, she worked at Cloud Imperium Games testing Star Citizen. All she needed was to boot up the game on a flat screen, and she was set. The routine now involves putting on the headset and ensuring the room is set up properly to avoid tripping over anything. And that’s before the actual physicality of the job.

A clear example arises when doing full regression testing. During this stage, testers go through the game after an update or new version to ensure nothing is broken. In the case of Cosmonious High, one of the tasks involves testing all 18 recipes, each requiring a mixing-in-a-bowl type of movement. “It’s really murder on the arms,” Fly says. “There’s this physical part of VR testing that is honestly one of the things that interest me.”

“Before Owlchemy, I was at Blizzard working on Hearthstone, and I can’t think of a stronger differential between testing a fully immersive VR video game and testing a digital card game,” says Paul Henderson, QA tester 1 at Owlchemy. “You go from a game that is the most basic inputs; you drag a card to the slot, you drag it to your opponent to how can you move? That’s your inputs! Go move.”

Cosmonious High



Blood & Truth

Through the Motions

Mayank Lal joined Keywords Studios in Gurgaon, India, back in early 2017. He started as a QA games tester. Almost seven years later, he's a quality assurance test lead. During this time, Lal witnessed VR gaining more relevance in the studio's portfolio. This, thankfully, led to better conditions for the 40 dedicated VR testers out of around 200 employees.

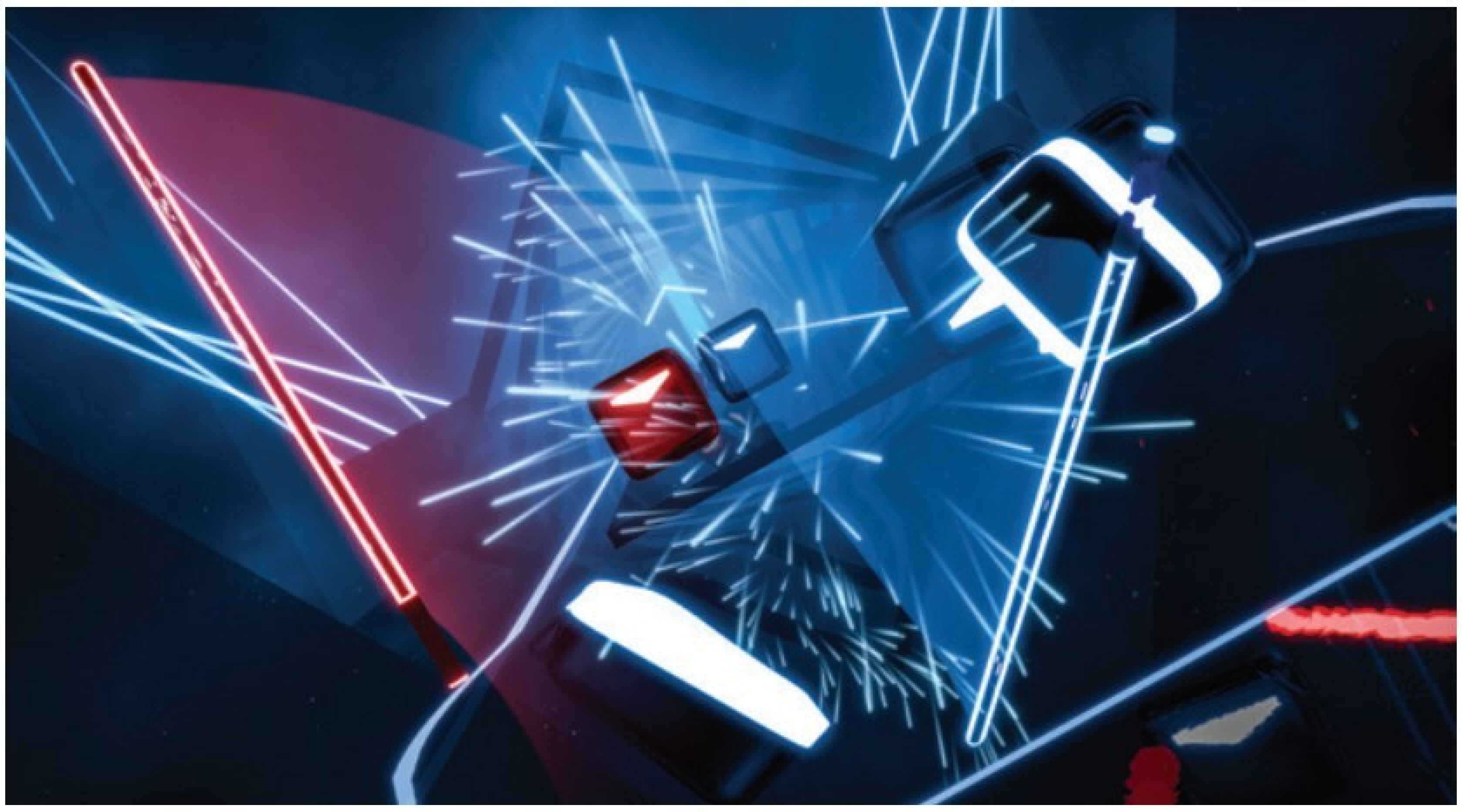
In the beginning, things were messy. It started with a partnership with Oculus back when Meta (formerly Facebook) wasn't involved. Testers quickly realized some issues needed to be addressed. "One of the most common things that we observed as testers in that particular time was feeling nausea in longer periods of use," he says. "Headsets also heat up and that actually affects the skin on the face. Sometimes headsets are shared between testers, which increases the probability of getting infections."

One of the policies that came up was about breaks. For every 20 minutes using the headset, testers are encouraged, not mandated, to take a 10-minute "break" to file any bugs, report issues, and so on. Over time, they realized the platform just isn't for everyone. Employees can present a doctor's note to HR so they're no longer deployed into VR projects. Nowadays, the studio doesn't immediately assign a tester to VR. After six months with other platforms, they're given training and, eventually, see if they're comfortable with virtual reality.

"People actually leave here," Lal says. "When it comes to health, people don't think, 'I will not have another opportunity,' because in this company you're already learning things and adding them to your CV. So if they feel we're exerting them, they'd not even give a letter of resignation. Next day they'd call and not come back."

During the pandemic, the studio got each tester a separate foam attachment, which mitigated the infection problem. Now, testers are back in the office – only people at a managerial level can opt for a hybrid model – where they have a floor dedicated solely to VR projects. On average, they spend half of their eight-hour shifts in the headset.

Beat Saber



All these elements vary depending on the studio's internal rules or even across different branches. In the Québec, Montreal, branches of Keywords Studios, former functional QA tester Sammy Fox says you were expected to do "as much VR as you could tolerate," as long as it didn't take time from actual bug reporting or assigned tasks for the day. That being said, breaks were regulated, with two paid short breaks and one unpaid but longer lunch break.

Another former tester, who requested anonymity, says even though everyone is legally an employee on file, almost all testers were on an "on-call basis." Basically, they'd find out if they're working the next day through email, receiving a new notice on a daily basis.

While they were lucky enough to get fairly consistent work, pay was a letdown. Doing the conversion from Canadian to American dollars, the source says they peaked at around $10.50 USD an hour, back when the local minimum wage was around $9 USD an hour. They add that, for comparison, test leads were making more than $30,000 USD a year around the same time.

During busy periods, it was common for a single tester to work on multiple projects per day. While the source didn't do much overtime, there were morning, afternoon, and, on occasion, so-called "graveyard" shifts that occurred overnight during the week and weekends. Employees would receive bonus pay for doing so. "The worst memory was once a stress test over the weekend, and someone projectile vomited all over a busy shared bathroom," the source says. "It wasn't cleaned until Monday morning because maintenance wasn't available on the weekend. You could imagine the smell."

Waving

In a 2017 report from *CNN*, experts say that the cause behind eye strain, headaches, and nausea is due to the way VR affects the eye-brain connection. In real life, the eyes and brain simultaneously focus on a point in space. In virtual reality, the responses aren't coupled together, but separated. "The way we look and interact is changed because we may be projecting onto the eyes something that looks far away, but in reality, it's only a few centimeters from the eye," behavioral neuroscientist Walter Greenleaf said in the report.

Resident Evil 4 VR

These conditions are aggravated when testing games still in development. While the teams try to ensure that builds are hitting a stable framerate before involving QA, often opting for excluding some assets entirely in the early stages of a project, it can be challenging.

"I remember a racing game I tested where the camera went haywire and I almost fell to the ground," says Fox. In the office, there was always a supply of ginger and anti-nausea pills to help with motion sickness and in-game "accidents" like this. "When that happened, I would remove the headset, go ask my team lead for a Gravol, and then do desk work until nausea subsides and you feel fine enough to resume doing physical VR testing," he adds.

Eric Kozlowsky, former senior environment artist at Armature Studio, recalls a similar tradition when working on Resident Evil 4 VR. "I get motion sickness pretty easily in real life, let alone in VR, so working with in-development software was challenging," he says. "I did get nauseous, but that was mitigated by limited time spent in the headset and using homeopathic remedies. So if I ever got motion sick, ginger candy would help a bit."

Even though testers usually spend the most time using headsets, the job leads them to find creative workarounds in their routines. Archie Crampton, lead QA technician at Universally Speaking and gingernut biscuit advocator, finds changing his height in-game from two to 15 feet tall, as hilarious as it is, helpful. In addition, he says most people in the studio test Beat Saber seated. As they've gotten quite good at it, they're able to complete levels with less movement than you'd expect.

Hopkins says there have been many random helpful items in the Owlchemy office. This includes Bob, a mannequin head attached to the top of a camera tripod. Instead of pushing a real person in a chair, the team would put the headset on Bob and rotate it around to get different shots of a scene. "You have to be open-minded to things like that if you're gonna figure out solutions," Borland adds.

Alongside sheer creativity, almost everyone I spoke to shares excitement about VR's future. Sure, new technologies also bring new processes – Owlchemy, in particular, found not everybody waves equally while testing hand-tracking – but also keep QA fresh.

Next time you play a VR game with comfortable controls and a lack of visual glitches, you can thank the testers. After all, they're the ones who crouched, waved, mixed, and climbed a skyscraper dozens of times to ensure the best result. "Towards the end of Cosmonious High, developers would come to me as an expert on the game cause I spent so much time in there," Fly says. "It makes me feel really good that they recognize that QA is extremely important and knowledgeable." ■

Resident Evil 4 VR

GEAR

GAMING TVs FOR THE HOLIDAYS

As we near a particularly packed season of video games, if you've been waiting to upgrade your TV, we've picked two of our recent favorites, each built with several game-specific advantages in mind. **BY MATT MILLER & BRIAN SHEA**

❶ SONY BRAVIA XR A80L OLED

While the A80L isn't the absolute high-end (or most expensive) TV in Sony's current line-up, it offers a stellar package if you're looking for a display that does just about everything well while offering an exceptionally high value for gamers.

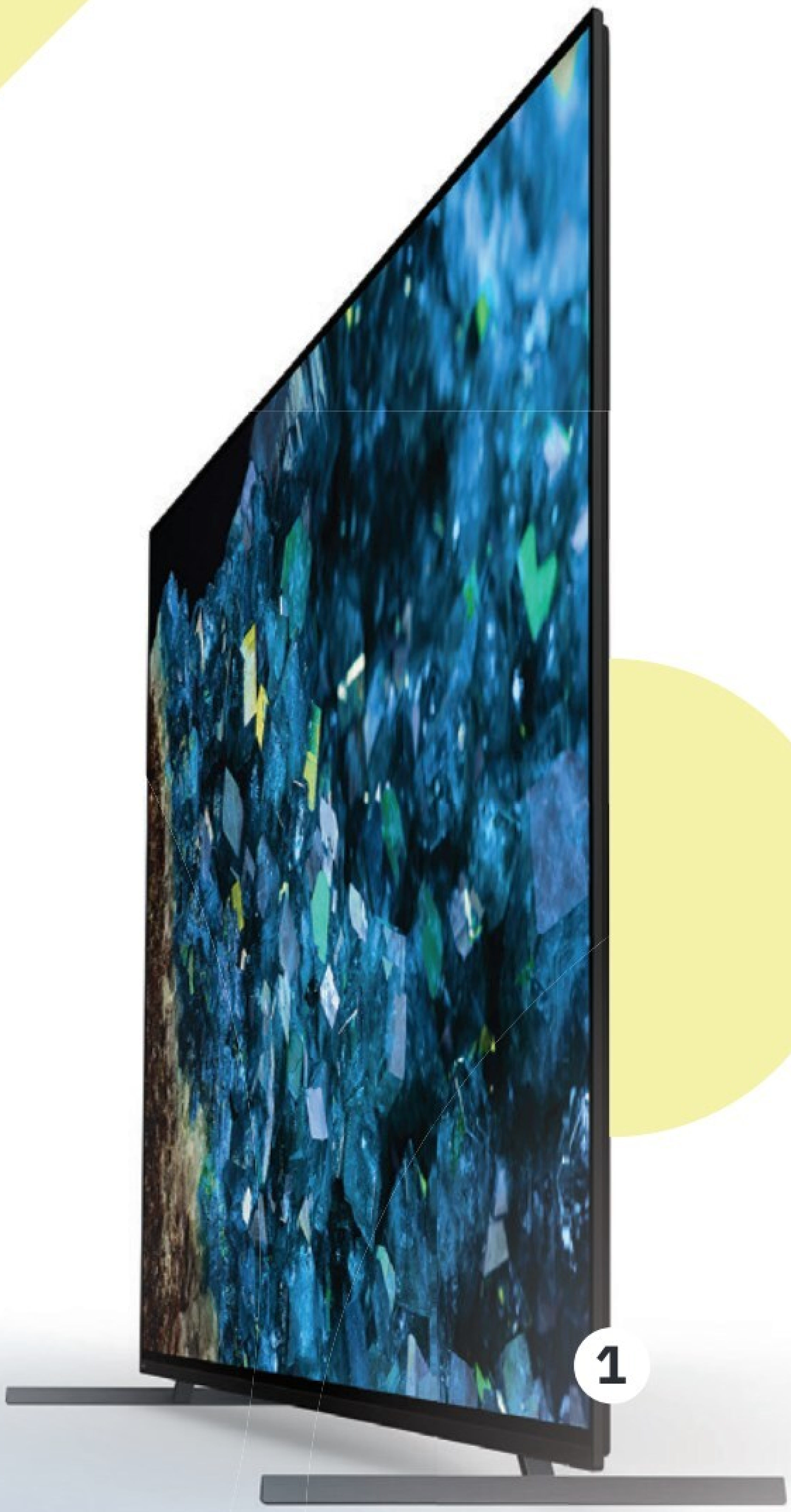
For our purposes, the new gaming menu is an incredibly valuable addition. A single button press on the remote brings up an array of options to tweak on the fly, from adjusting motion blur to turning on Variable Refresh Rate to a black equalizer. Gaming mode, in general, is excellently implemented, with minimal lag and fantastic picture quality across the board. Deep, total blacks and remarkably rich and nuanced colors are a particular highlight, which can be a big deal in many modern games. At peak, the OLED doesn't get quite as bright as some other displays, but that's likely only an issue if your setup is in a consistently bright room. The A80L also plays very nicely with its cousin, the PS5, offering a special HDR mode.

As a gaming television, one of the few knocks is its limited HDMI 2.1 ports. With only two, one of which might be in use to connect an ARC-enabled audio system, you might not be able to to plug in all your systems at once. But remember that many lower fidelity systems (like the Switch) could connect via one of the other two standard ports.

Beyond gaming, the A80L is a robust and feature-rich television. A remarkable A.I.-powered upscaling takes things like older movies and YouTube videos and makes them look crisp and beautiful without losing their identity. This Bravia also leverages a fascinating audio technology that eschews traditional speakers for actuators and woofers that vibrate the screen to produce excellent audio – a relative rarity in modern displays. That audio can be added to many home theater setups.

For gamers looking for a TV that looks and sounds great for this year's biggest titles but also nails all the checkmarks for a great shared family set, the A80L is an easy choice.

$2,500 (65") | *electronics.sony.com*



1

❷ SAMSUNG NEO QLED 4K QN90B

Samsung's efforts to appeal to video game fans have paid off. Not only does the Samsung Neo QLED provide vivid colors and HDR, high framerates, and 4K resolution, but various innovations help cater to the specific wants and needs of gamers.

That effort starts with the Samsung Gaming Hub, a standard feature for all Samsung Smart TVs and monitors 2022 or newer. With subscription services like Xbox Game Pass, Nvidia GeForce Now, and Amazon Luna, you can play several games directly on your TV. That means if you only have one Xbox Series X, but it's connected to another monitor, you can relocate your gaming session without relocating your console with cloud-enabled titles from Xbox Game Pass; your save even automatically transfers if you have cloud saving enabled.

Connecting your active subscriptions and pairing a Bluetooth controller to the TV is a quick, low-effort process. Though you can connect through WiFi, we recommend using the built-in Ethernet port for the fastest and most reliable connection. Playing cloud versions of games like Starfield and Halo Infinite, we experienced little-to-no noticeable latency or resolution dips. Cloud gaming still struggles to feel precisely as good as playing local versions, but our experience with the Gaming Hub was about as good as we've seen.

If you'd like to game the old-fashioned way, you have four HDMI 2.1 ports to connect your consoles. Once connected, you can enable Game Mode, which allows you to tweak various impressive settings, including screen presets for different genres, an optional virtual aim point that permanently places a crosshair in the center of the screen, and the ability to zoom in on your game's minimap. More standard options like dynamic black equalizer and blur reduction complement these highly specific features to create an outstanding gaming experience.

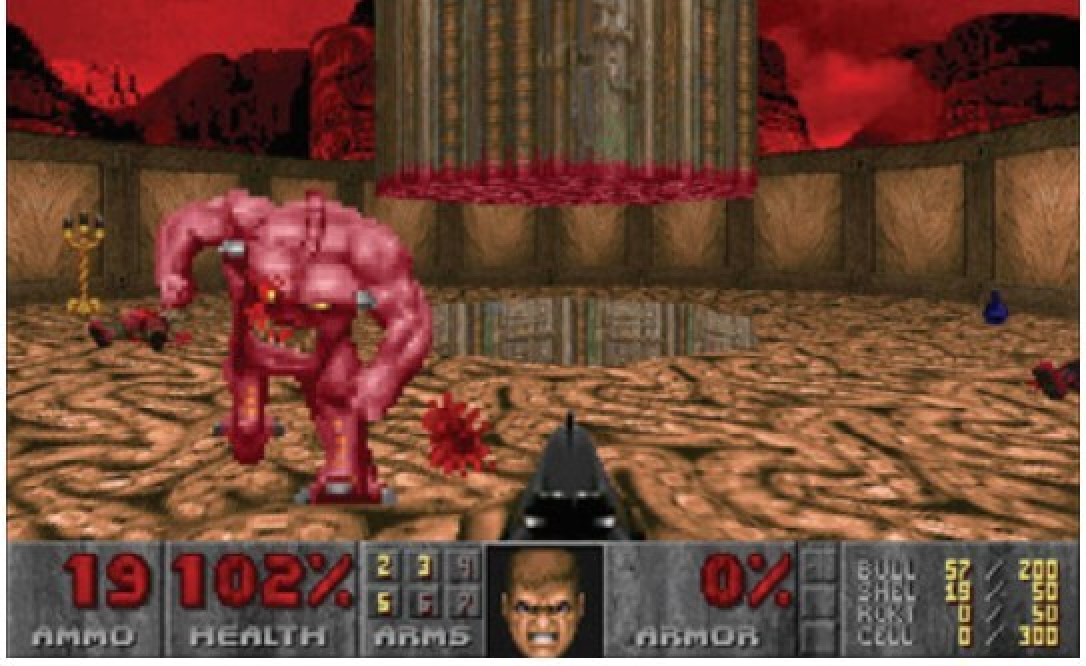
After spending hours playing on the Samsung Neo QLED, we have a hard time thinking about going back to a different primary gaming screen. The sometimes clunky interface does little to take away from outstanding picture quality, sleek physical design, and an unrivaled gaming-centric feature set. ■

$2,600 (65") | ***samsung.com***

2

Input Lag
Faster
Game Picture
Racing
Screen Ratio
16:9
Partial Zoom
On
Sound Output
Off
Guide
Game Settings

CHASING CERTAIN DOO



↓
Top: Doom (1993)
Opposite: Dusk (2018)

M

How New Blood Interactive brought boomer shooters back from Hell

BY PAO YUMOL

YOU ARE A BANSHEE OF SPEED, a spark crawling its way up a fuse, a disaster waiting to happen. Until –

A scarecrow makes the mistake of turning into a man right before you, a shotgun-toting farmer with the barrel pointed at your face. You greet him with your own shotgun, double-barreled, finger on the trigger.

You eclipse him in a bear hug of bullets and sound. Above you, the sky – already the hue of a bloodhound's fever dream – is somehow even redder. One moment later, and you're already gone.

This is Dusk, one of a handful of recent games harkening back to the Doom and Quake era and the invention of the FPS genre itself. Over the past few years, "boomer shooters" like Dusk, Amid Evil, and Ultrakill have awakened a hunger long thought dormant, and publisher New Blood Interactive is on a mission to ensure we remain well-fed.

KNEE-DEEP IN THE DEAD

In 1993, a shotgun blast thundered throughout millions of American bedrooms. It echoed across college dormitories and office cubicles, casting firework bursts of light onto the faces of whoever witnessed it.

The blast was so powerful it survived a journey across the globe and back, withstanding entire generations without fading away. It afflicted any who heard it with a strange sickness: The fanatical desire to bully digital devils into piles of bloody gibs (i.e., pulpy chunks of gore).

In short, they discovered Doom.

In Doom, the player is a space marine barreling through military bases and eventually into Hell itself, laying waste to rooms of demon invaders. It's still revered as a towering monument to video game violence.

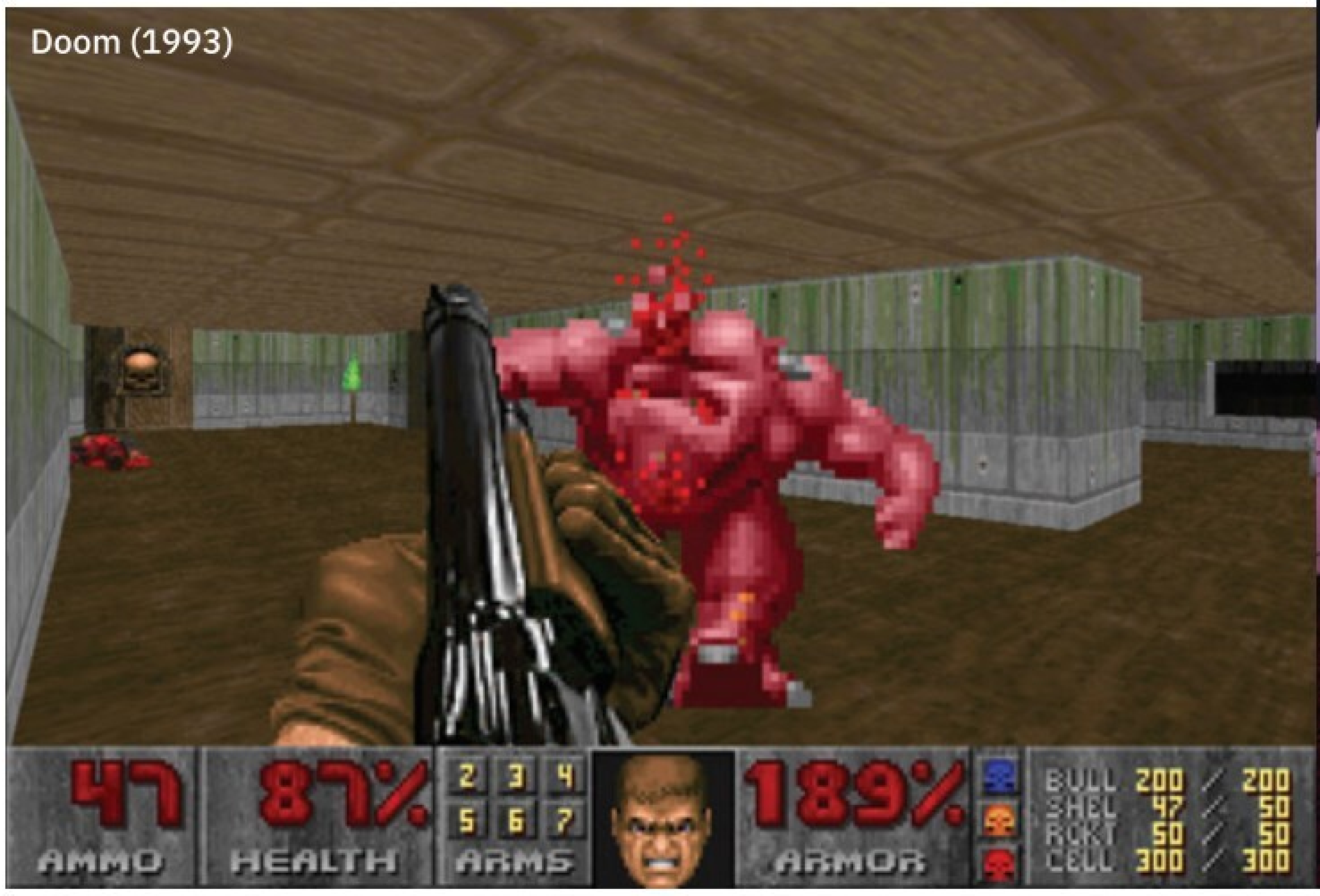
Id Software, Doom's developer, had found earlier success with 1992's Wolfenstein 3D, a game that synthesized 3D graphics with fast, first-person action gameplay. Together with Doom, they helped shape the FPS genre and kickstart a PC gaming revolution.

Not only is Doom's engine the basis for countless user-made WADs – Doom lingo for "mods" – but it also serves as the foundation for Raven Software's Heretic (1994) and Hexen (1995). These games swap Doom's sci-fi for dark fantasy, arming the player with flails and scepters instead of guns.

Such was the era of the "Doom clone." The studio Apogee – now 3D Realms – followed up Rise of the Triad: Dark War (1995) with Duke Nukem 3D (1996), a game now notorious for its hyperbolic "dudebro" humor. Other Doom clones include Star Wars: Dark Forces (1995), Blood (1997), and Shadow Warrior (1997).

On a mechanical level, these games are united by high movement speeds, labyrinthine levels, and level "scores" measuring completion times and percentages (e.g., how many enemies or secrets the player found). Aesthetic similarities include slasher-movie bloodiness and animations that render enemies into supernovas of gibs.

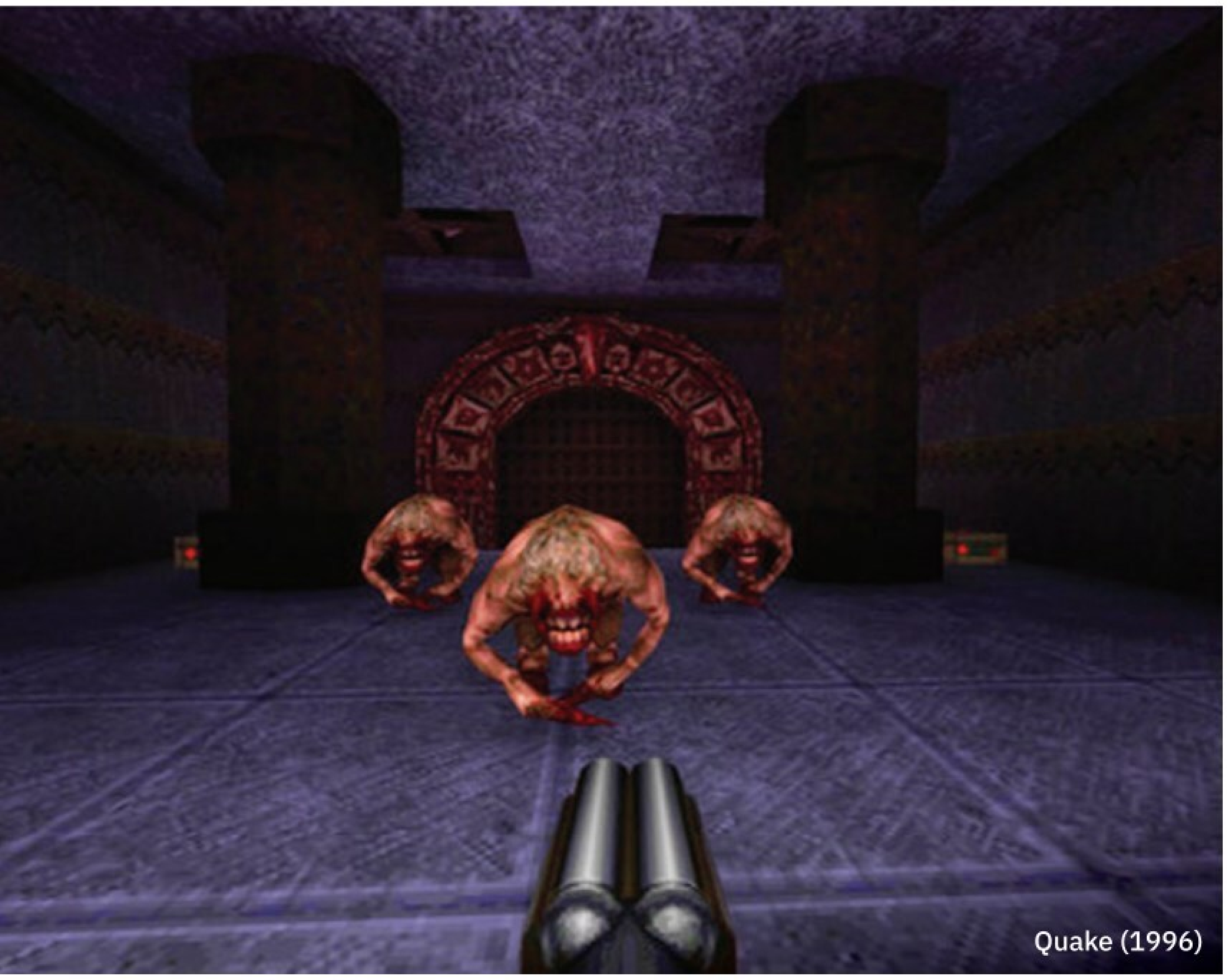
After 1994's Doom II, Id Software broke new ground again with Quake in 1996, introducing "true 3D" levels with vertical camera movements and the "deathmatch." 1997's Quake II introduced animated cutscenes and more comprehensive lighting effects; dim hallways turned bullets into kamikaze fireflies.


Doom (1993)

For a moment in the ’90s, it felt like Doom clutched the very future in its claws. But over the next two decades, the FPS genre reinvented itself many times over to accommodate the trends of the growing industry. The era of the Doom clone faded away – until recently.

By the time New Blood released David Szymanski’s Dusk in 2018, it had been exactly 25 years since Doom first gripped the world with its fury. The same year, New Blood released Indefatigable’s Amid Evil. In both games, Doom and Quake are evident as influences from the moment you train your weapon on your first bloodthirsty freak.

But these games aren’t Doom clones: they are boomer shooters.


Quake (1996)

DIMENSION OF THE DOOMED

First, the obvious. Why “boomer shooter”? According to the dates above, most members of the original Doom clone audience would be Gen X’ers.

Szymanski says that the anachronism in calling themselves “boomers” was always part of the joke. “We’re the out-of-touch boomer dad mowing our lawns, drinking Monster Energy, and talking about how awesome Quake was,” he says. Yet the term also alludes to the genuine longing that prompted developers like him to reevaluate the history of the FPS genre itself.

In Szymanski’s opinion, signs of the changing times were evident by the mid-2000s. “It’s before stuff got really cutscene-heavy and ‘hand-holdy’ and stuff like that,” he says.

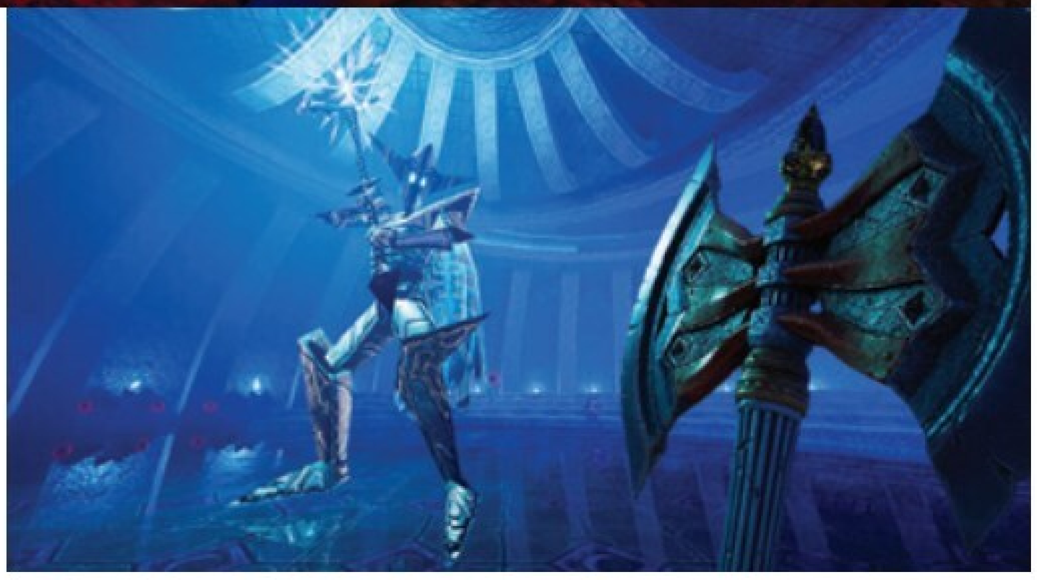
Szymanski, who grew up in rural Pennsylvania in a house swallowed by trees, could only experience the genre’s evolution vicariously. In early adolescence, he’d cultivated a love for shooters after discovering Chasm: The Rift – a lesser-known shooter from the Quake days – on a shareware disc.

But the hardware in his family’s computer regularly failed to meet the requirements of then-modern games, which were becoming more demanding as graphics advanced. Instead, he frequented the local library to use its internet, gleaning as much information as possible about the latest FPS titles.

“2004 was a mini-golden age of FPSs,” Szymanski says. “Before stuff went the way of the linear cinematic shooter [...] that was really when that formula was at its best.” That year marked the release of three landmark FPS titles: Halo 2, Half-Life 2, and Doom 3, each alluding to new futures for the genre.

Though he’d harbored a quiet longing to play Doom 3 himself, Szymanski was content to play the first Doom, the first Quake, and other ’90s shooters like Chasm, laying the foundation for his fascination with the era.

Amid Evil (2018)



ICON OF SIN

Meanwhile, as the FPS genre continued shifting, so did the game industry. Dave Oshry, one of New Blood's co-founders, witnessed this first-hand. "PC gaming was very dead for, like, 10 years," Oshry says. "It was not the '90s anymore."

Id Software's John Carmack once famously compared stories in games to stories in porn, arguing that narrative is unimportant in either context. History, however, proved him wrong.

For example, 2007's Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare represented a watershed moment. In addition to foretelling the industry's fixation on militaristic settings, COD 4 contained the series' most ambitious single-player campaign to date, shifting perspectives between characters of various backgrounds as they navigated a global nuclear conflict.

By the early 2010s, TV critics had begun using the term "prestige TV" to describe shows that were considered on par with film in artistry; soon, the idea of a "prestige game" emerged, too. 2013 alone had The Last of Us, Bioshock Infinite, and Grand Theft Auto V – big-budget epics rich with detail.

That same year, Oshry was one of the people at the helm of a project with much different aspirations. He'd joined a studio called Interceptor Entertainment – now Slipgate Ironworks – to direct a remake of Rise of the Triad.

The ROTT team included Leon Zawada and Simon Rance, childhood friends who later formed the studio Indefatigable. Though this was their first professional experience in game development, the two shared a storied history of designing WADs together, swapping turns at Rance's PC as children.

"My uncle had a copy of Doom II and used to make maps for it – specifically, multiplayer maps," Zawada says. "It was such a revelation that you could make these 3D worlds."

After ROTT was released in 2013, Oshry, Zawada, and Rance each left Interceptor to pursue other projects. Empowered by their stint in a professional environment, Zawada and Rance began working on their own game. Though Doom and Quake were primary inspirations for level design and game feel, Heretic and Hexen influenced the game's visual identity and arsenal of magic-infused weapons.

Oshry, on the other hand, founded New Blood with some friends. They spent a few years developing VR games before pivoting into indie publishing, but Oshry still hadn't felt that they'd found their voice.

Suddenly, in 2016, Oshry got a Twitter DM that changed everything. "This random guy's like, 'Hey, do you want to check out my game?'" Oshry recalls.

That person was David Szymanski, who'd discovered Oshry through 2013's ROTT. He'd developed a taste for horror films in college, and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, with its sepia-tinted visions of a remote domicile in decay, resonated with the horror he'd known from his youth: the darkness buried in the thicket, singing from the heart of the woods outside his home. He'd channeled these experiences into developing an FPS called Dusk.

Oshry opened up Dusk's demo and was floored. "You know, everything that people love Dusk for was all in this tiny little demo," Oshry says. "There was something special about the way this guy worked."

He responded to Szymanski with an offer to publish Dusk through New Blood. Indefatigable got in touch shortly after, and Amid Evil joined the roster.

"The rest is history," Oshry says.

THE REALM OF BLACK MAGIC

What Oshry saw in both Dusk and Amid Evil is what binds boomer shooters together; it's a mutation of the Doom clone DNA that unites demon slayers from then and now. Outside of New Blood, the boomer shooter label also applies to Ion Fury, Turbo Overkill, Prodeus, and other FPS games that are otherwise "retro." Though these games may differ in presentation and mechanics, their similarities are primarily experiential.

In essence, boomer shooters inspire three distinct feelings:

a) a devotional love of the shotgun
b) an unforgiving need for speed
c) an archaeologist's fetish for secrets

The first need not be literal; neither Hexen nor Amid Evil features a shotgun in their arsenals, after all. In this case, the shotgun is a symbol: the knee jerks when the lights come on in a crowded room full of enemies, an extension of your id itself. The shotgun's syncopated, start-stop rhythm demands constant movement, coaxing you to waltz through the open spaces in a hail of bullets.

Indefatigable designed Amid Evil around this feeling, inspired by the way Hexen and Heretic empowered magic users. "It always sucks when you play a game as a mage, and the mage is really weak," Zawada says.

"Yeah, exactly," Rance agrees. "It's magic."

Secrets are sacrosanct, too. Unlike Wolfenstein 3D, Doom contains levels full of complex polygons stacked into architectural oddities. This allowed level designers to tuck hidden items into the negative space around major set pieces.

Hidden doors and passages remain a prominent feature of boomer shooters, training players to become scholars of level design. Some secrets function as punchlines; in one of Amid Evil's secret rooms, for example, the words "El Zee wuz here" (as in "LZ," Leon Zawada's initials) are scrawled crudely across the wall.

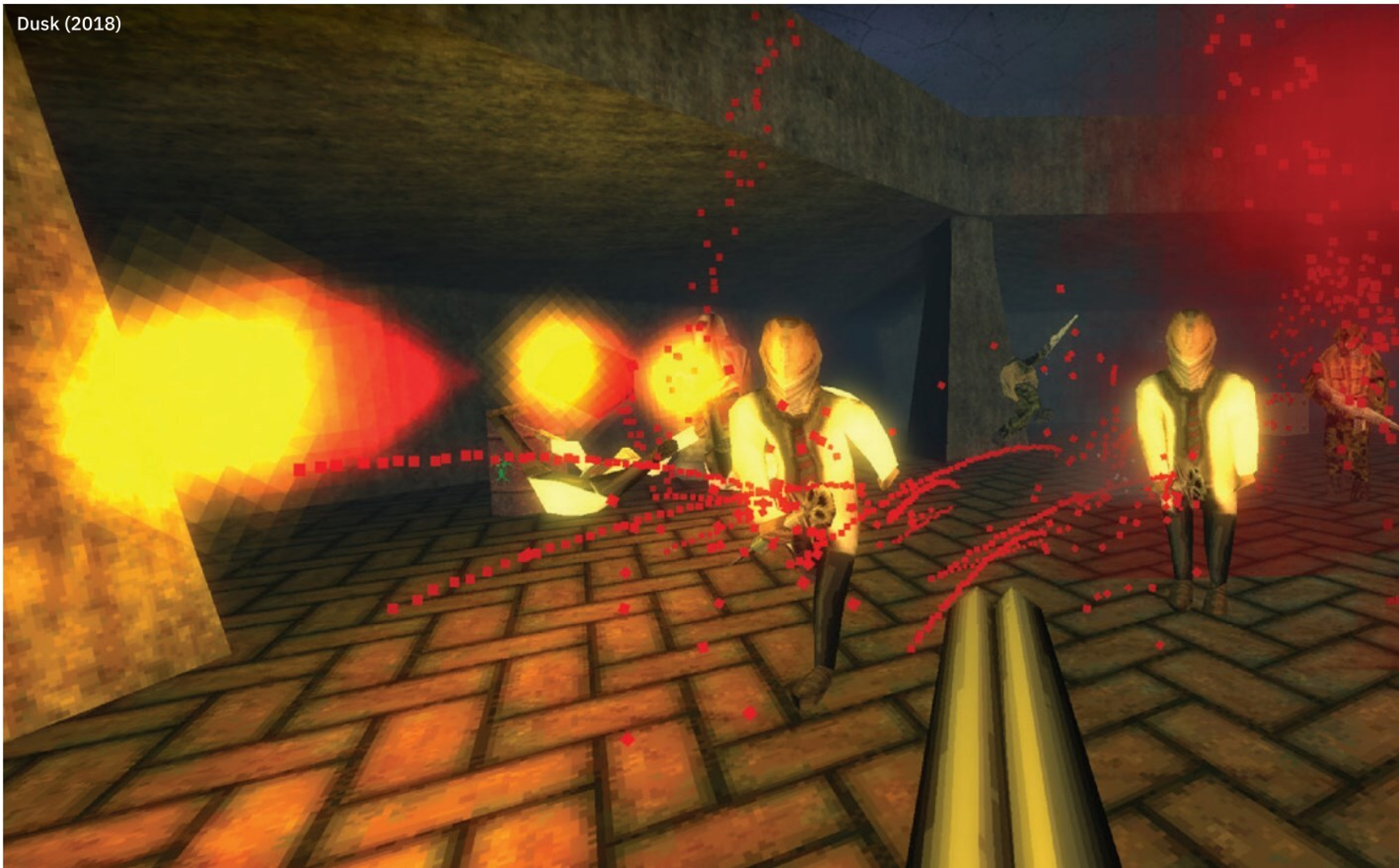
This is the design language of boomer shooters, and it's the reason they're easily identifiable regardless of a game's setting or visual aesthetic.

The question, however, remains: Why did boomer shooters emerge when they did? What happened between the '90s and now?

NO REST FOR THE LIVING

One answer is that Dusk and Amid Evil stood in stark contrast to the other games taking the world by storm at the time.

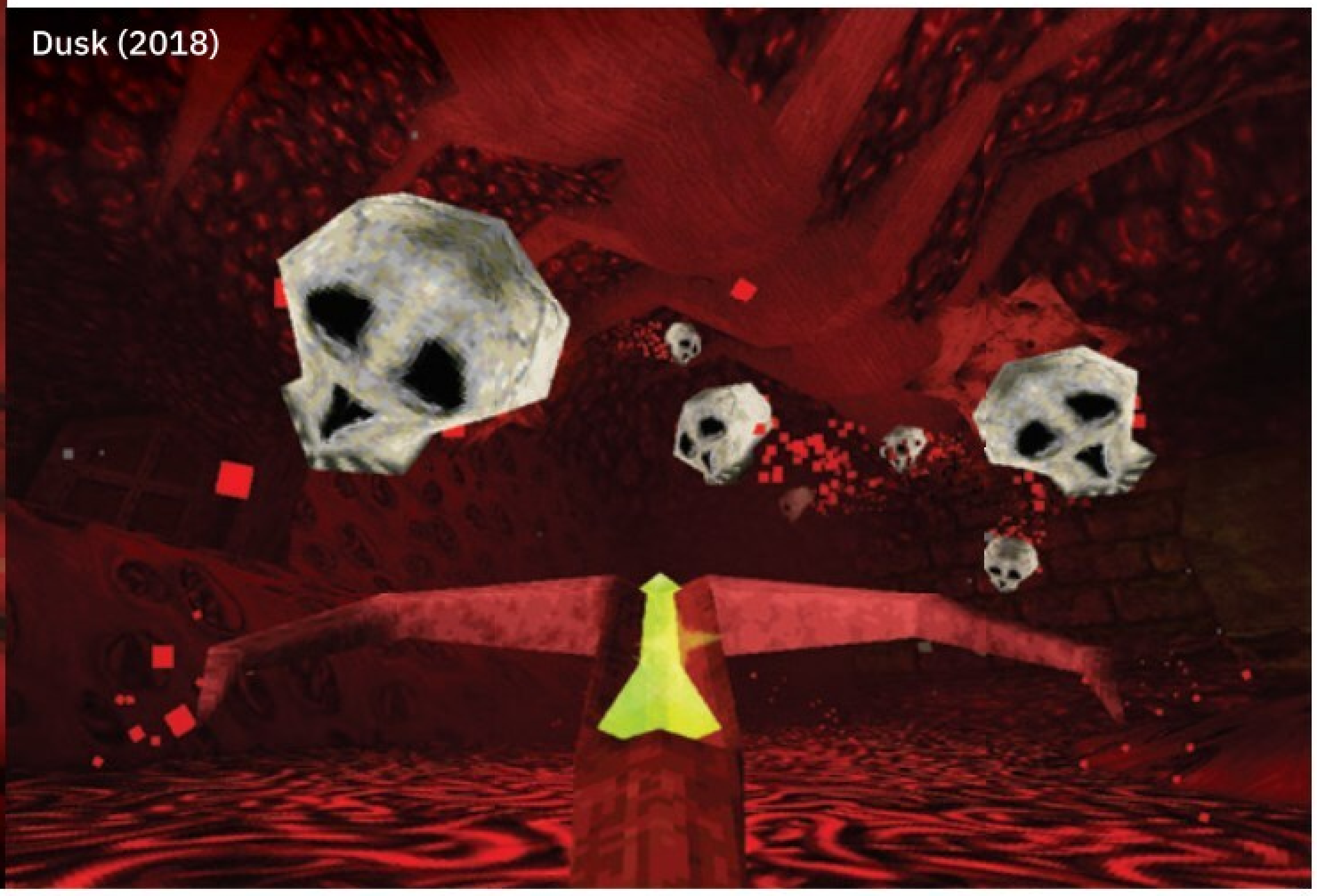
2018 was the year of the battle royale, and players rushed to cram themselves into the hundred-person arenas found in games like PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Fortnite. Single-player titles, on the other hand, remained committed to "prestige"-grade storytelling. The God of War reboot reimagined protagonist Kratos with newfound depth and maturity; Red Dead Redemption 2 reportedly spans 2,000 pages of dialogue. Dusk and Amid Evil are



Dusk (2018)

SSADISTIC
+ TRIPLE KILL
+ EXPLODED
+ DOUBLE KILL
+ EXPLODED
+ EXPLODED

Ultrakill (2020)



Dusk (2018)

more intimate and self-contained experiences, by comparison, evoking a past without online matchmaking or pre-rendered 3D cutscenes.

Yet boomer shooters don't dwell too much on the past. Dusk and Amid Evil are more than modern WADs; they identify the "Doom clone" as its own form distinct from other shooters, adhering to its limitations while entertaining new possibilities. Both strive for more than homage, instead providing glimpses into an alternate reality in which the "Doom clone" had become enshrined more formally as its own genre – even as hardware evolved.

Ultrakill, a New Blood-published game developed by Finnish developer Hakita, exemplifies this. It finds common ground between bloody boomer shooter mania and the acrobatic character action gameplay of Capcom titles like Devil May Cry 3. The FPS elements, however, weren't always a part of the equation.

"After I played Dusk, I started visiting and revisiting those classic FPS games and started noticing the surprising amount of overlap [...] between them and character action games," Hakita says.

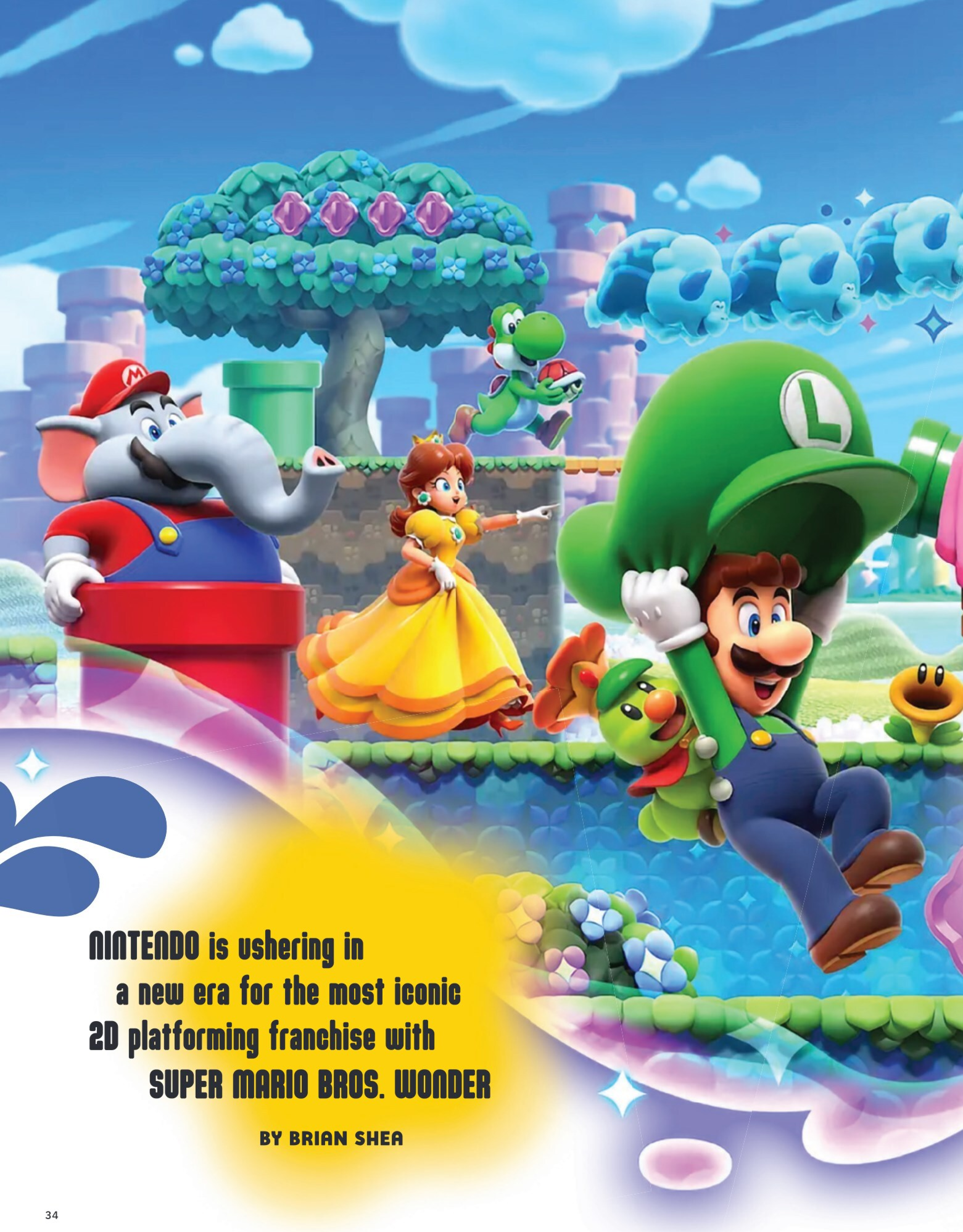
This shared ground is what allows games like Dusk, Amid Evil, and Ultrakill to cohabit within the same genre. Their common denominators are primarily experiential, enabling bolder interpretations of the "Doom clone" form.

Additionally, boomer shooters anticipate the shifts that have occurred across the gaming medium over the past couple of decades. For example, when Quake was first released, many players completed the game using only a keyboard. By contrast, Ultrakill's blistering speeds all but demand that the player use a mouse or thumbstick to aim, a method that results in more precision.

Overall, the boomer shooter movement has resulted in more than a few well-executed explorations within an older form; it's encouraged a newfound curiosity in reevaluating groundbreaking games from the past, charting possible futures for ideas that might have only been realized across a small handful of titles.

This perspective is anything but regressive. It's imaginative and transformative, becoming increasingly important as a listless yet all-encompassing nostalgia continues to grip the greater media landscape beyond games.

The future looks a bit brighter, and only time will tell what new games and sub-genres will emerge. Until then, the shotgun's loaded, and there's a roomful of bloodthirsty devil-horned creeps just around the corner. ■



NINTENDO is ushering in a new era for the most iconic 2D platforming franchise with SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

BY BRIAN SHEA

Powering UP

Upon its announcement as the grand finale of the June 2023 Nintendo Direct, Super Mario Bros. Wonder declared the series' return to the 2D side-scrolling genre with a colorful bang. The game signals the return to Mario's roots from a core gameplay perspective, but it's more connected to Mario's past than most people initially realized.

While many remember the creative level design, expressive art style, and discovery of the game-changing Wonder Flowers, the most memorable moment came at the end of the announcement trailer, as everyone's favorite plumber grabbed a never-before-seen item and transformed into an elephant. That moment told everyone that Super Mario Bros. Wonder, despite taking the series back to its 2D origins, is trying bold, new things unlike anything the franchise has seen before.

We traveled to both coasts of the United States, first to New York then to Seattle, to get our hands on Super Mario Bros. Wonder and speak with the developers to learn more about how Nintendo plans on once again surprising us with its newest entry in one of gaming's longest-running franchises.

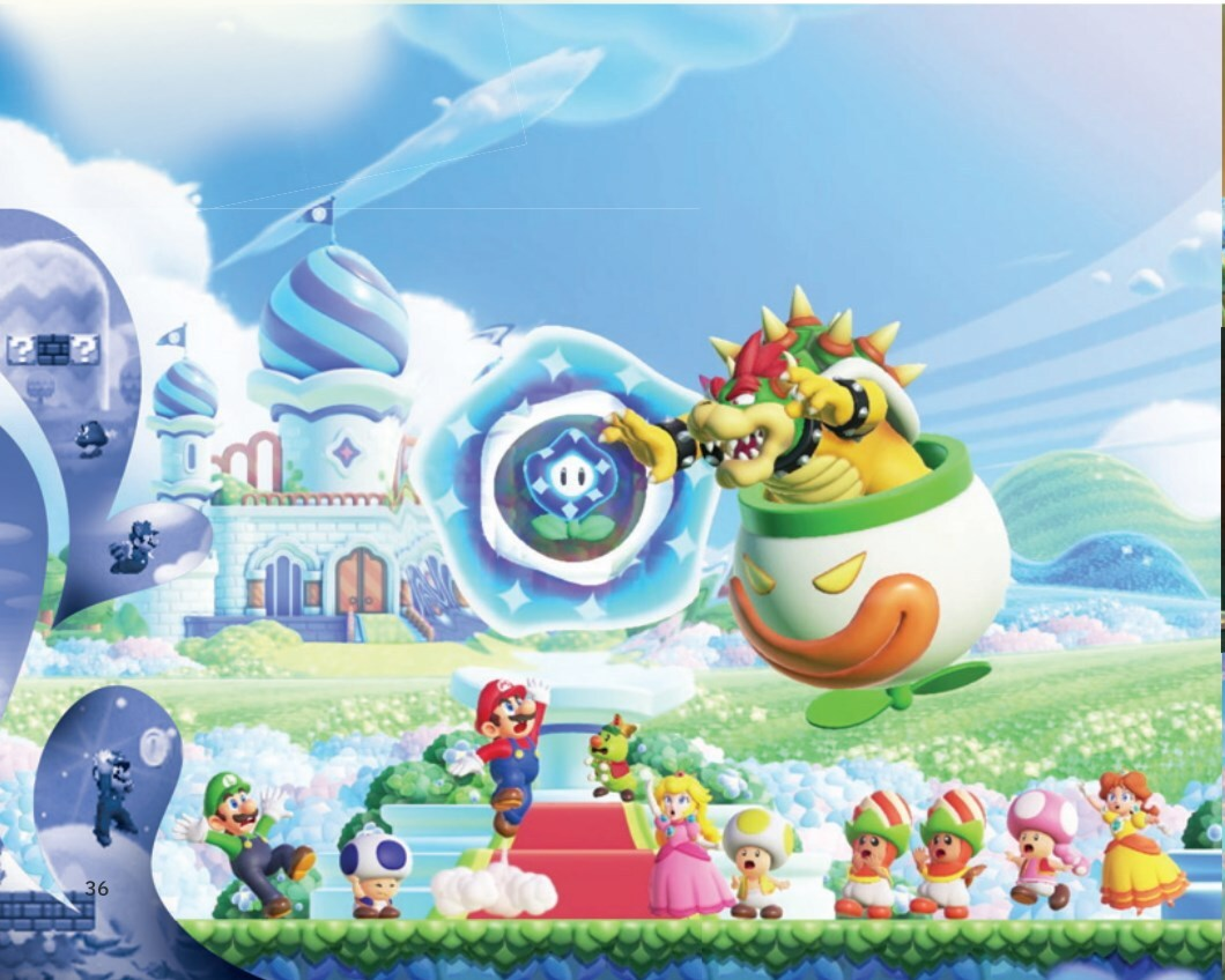
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** October 20

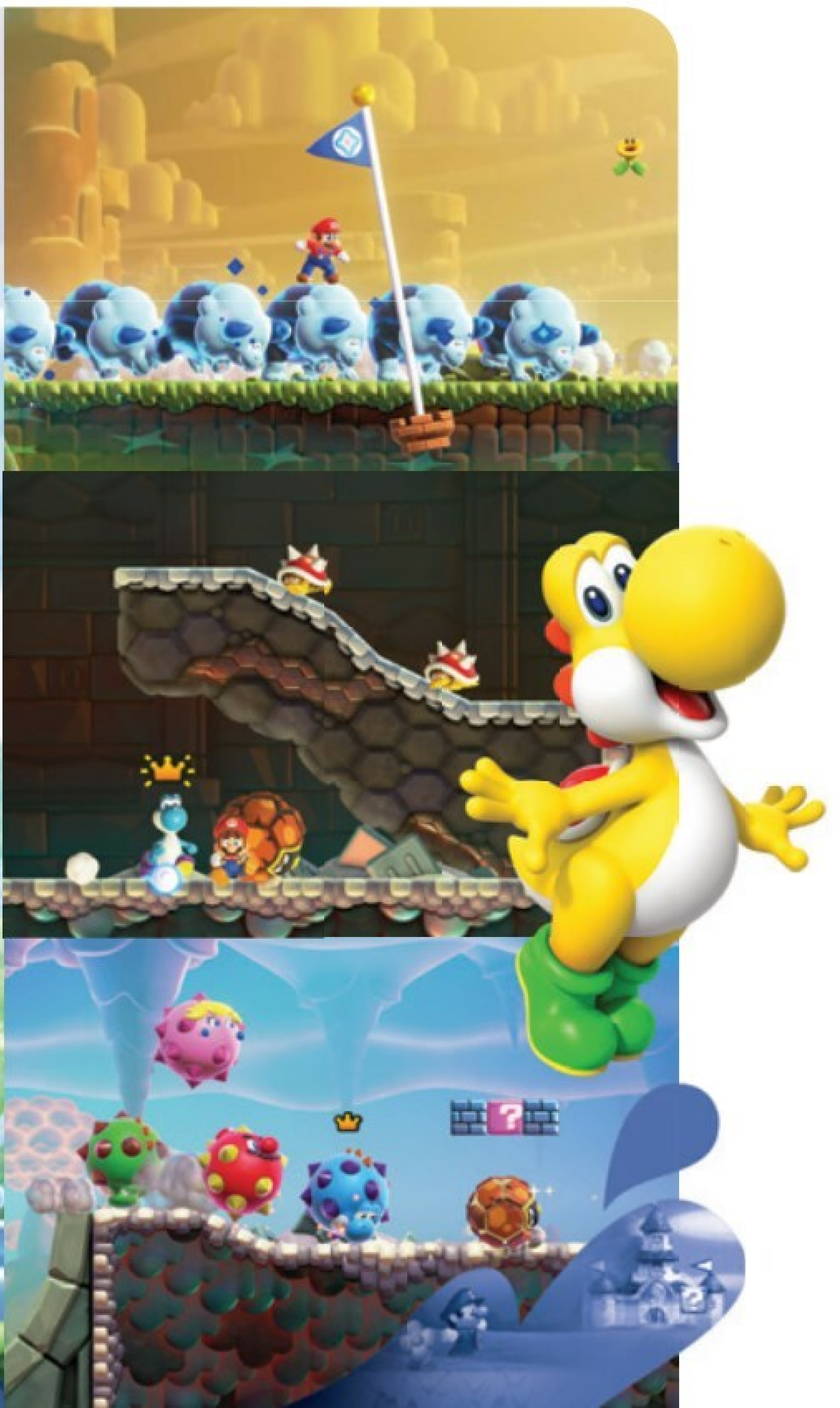
WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

In 2006, the Super Mario series celebrated 10 years since its triumphant leap to 3D with Super Mario 64. That seminal entry proved Nintendo's iconic plumber could transition to 3D and still be the juggernaut franchise it was in 2D. It also became the blueprint for nearly every 3D platformer for the next several years. Super Mario 64 looked amazing in motion, but more importantly, it played like a dream. To say it revolutionized gaming would be an understatement.

In 2002, Nintendo released Super Mario Sunshine on GameCube to critical and fan acclaim. While many celebrated the continued success of this 3D evolution of one of gaming's most important and beloved franchises, some wondered if Mario's 2D past was just that: the past.

Eleven years had passed since the last 2D Super Mario game was released in 1995 with Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island on the Super Nintendo. The Game Boy Advance received only remakes of previous Mario side-scrollers. As Nintendo worked on the next 3D entry, the company looked towards its popular handheld system, the Nintendo DS, as a potential home for a return to 2D Mario.





New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe

The result was New Super Mario Bros., a game that brought the series back to the classic 2D gameplay, but with modern visuals and gameplay conventions. “We’d been working on the New Super Mario Bros. series based on the idea of recreating the experience of the original Super Mario Bros., which released in 1985, in a new way,” series producer Takashi Tezuka, whose past credits also include directing Super Mario World, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, and Super Mario World 2: Yoshi’s Island, says. “You can think of it as carefully preserving the core gameplay while dressing it up with new elements that enhance it.”

By recapturing the magic of the classic entries and bringing it forward into the then-modern era, New Super Mario Bros. was a critical darling and a massive success with players. The game went on to become the highest-selling game on Nintendo’s best-selling system of all time.

“For the New Super Mario Bros. series, we did what we always do, which is go back and review what we had in the past and we looked at how we could make changes to make something appropriate for the current generation,” Tezuka says. “The New Super Mario Bros. series continued for a long period of time and one of the things I think we accomplished during that period was creating new Mario fans.”

The success of the DS entry led to three sequels across three different platforms. Each entry in the franchise sold extremely well, charting at least in the top five of their respective console’s all-time sales chart. However, following 2012’s New Super Mario Bros. U, the series went dark. Though the New Super Mario Bros. games always sold well, more critical voices emerged with each subsequent entry, claiming series stagnation. Each entry was well-made and well-designed, but the games began feeling similar.

Though the absence had become elongated, matching the 11-year gap between Yoshi’s Island and New Super Mario Bros., Nintendo was far from resting on its laurels, as the developers continued to think about how to deliver in a way that both they and their fans would be happy. “There’s been quite a bit of time since the last installment in the New Super Mario Bros. franchise, but when we’re creating another iteration in the series, we understand that we have to go above and beyond the last title,” Tezuka says. “And so, for us, we were really filled with a lot of very strong feelings about wanting to create something with a lot of very rich content.”

During this absence, fans of the 2D side of Mario could get their fix through Super Mario Run, an auto-runner for mobile devices, or make their own fun with the two entries in the Super Mario Maker franchise. But it wasn’t the same. However, Nintendo seems to have found a way to one-up the games of its past and now, the 2D side of the series is poised for yet another injection of life and another groundbreaking comeback.

THE CONTINUED SEAL OF QUALITY

For nearly the last 40 years, Nintendo’s flagship franchise has maintained its popularity ever since the revolutionary first entry in the Super Mario Bros. franchise in 1985. According to series producer Takashi Tezuka, the tenure of the staff involved is a key part of keeping series like Mario and The Legend of Zelda as industry leaders.

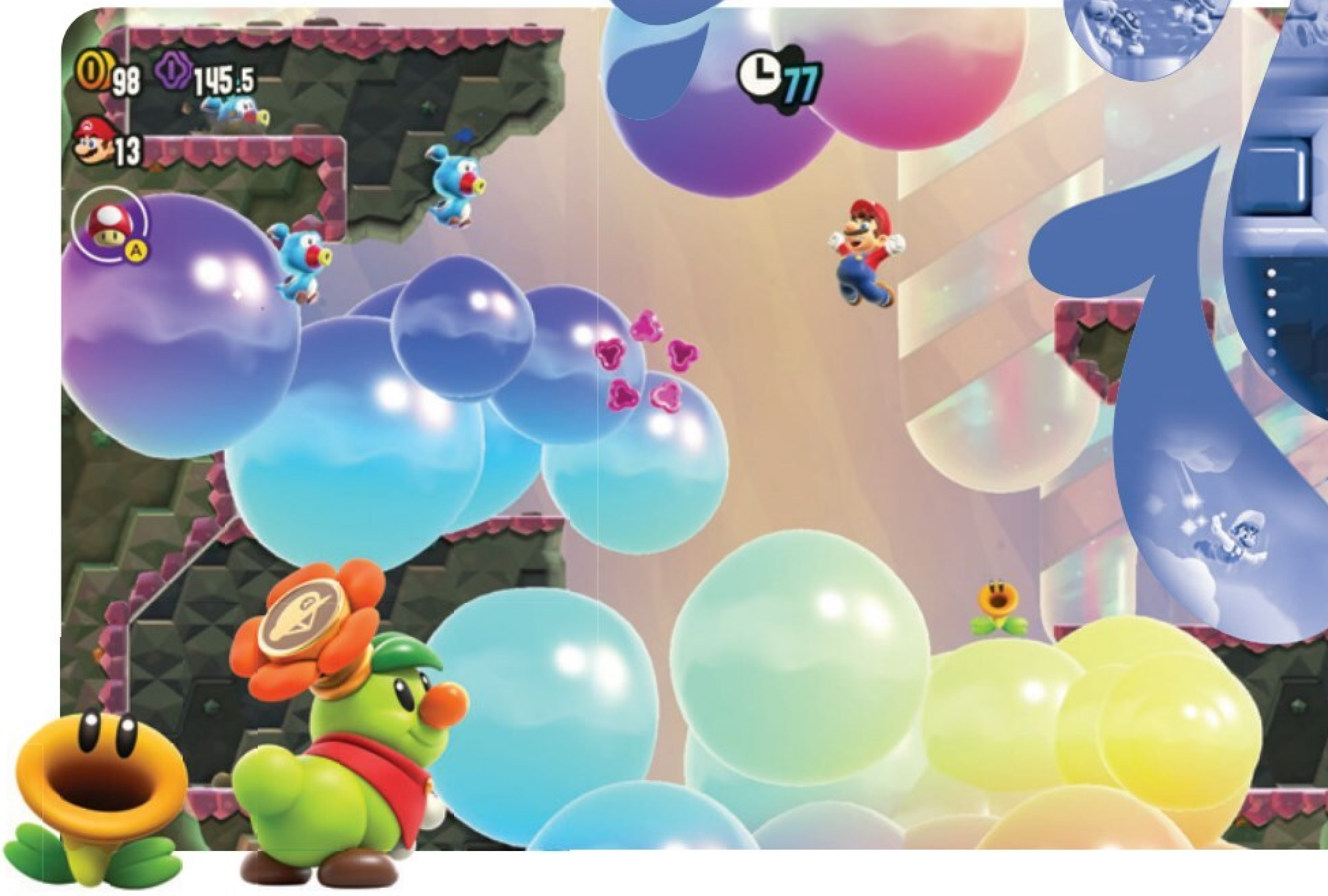
“Many of them have been working on these franchises for a long time,” he says. “For example, Mr. [Eiji] Aonuma became a part of the Zelda team at some point and has been there throughout and for Mario, it’s myself! I think something that’s very important to the Mario series, of course, is the level-design philosophy.”

For Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto, the easy-to-understand gameplay is largely to thank for the overall-wearing plumber’s continued relevance. “It’s very intuitive in that when you see a hole in the ground, you know to jump over it, when there’s a high place, you want to climb it,” Miyamoto told *Game Informer* at the premiere of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. “When that intuitive and direct connection happens then, people are encouraged to say, ‘I want to try this. I want to go there. I want to challenge this.’ And then, through that, they’re rewarded with other gameplay experiences. That feedback it creates, I think that’s the kind of gameplay that Mario is, and this is probably why it can be so appealing to so many different people across both ages, but also across cultures and countries.”

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

As Nintendo thought about how it wanted to bring Mario back to the 2D side-scrolling genre, it began looking towards the franchise's past. For director Shiro Mouri, who has worked with Nintendo since the late 1990s on titles like Super Mario Sunshine, New Super Mario Bros. U, and The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, there was no better place to look than the game that established Mario as the genre leader.

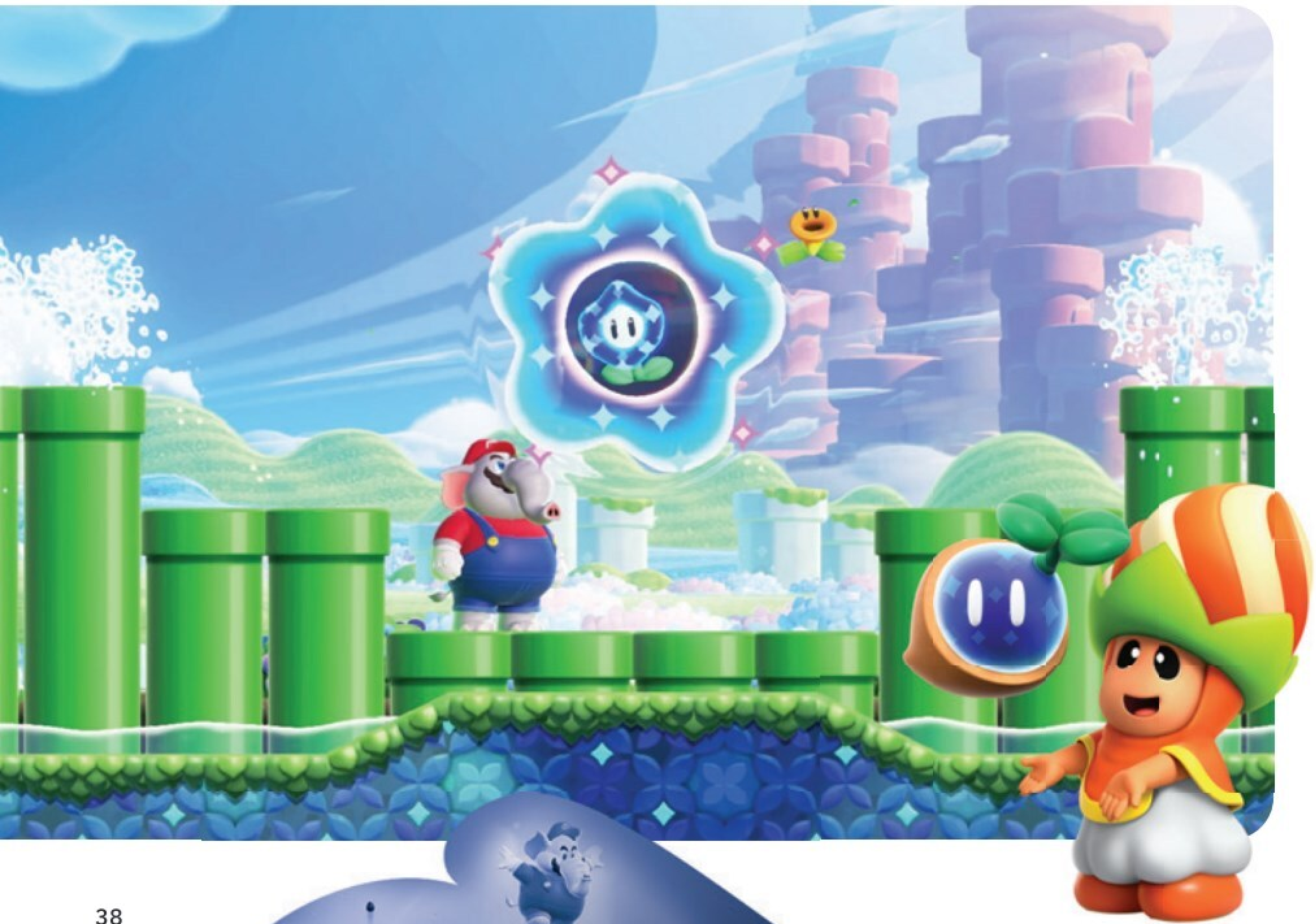
"I believe that the first Super Mario Bros. game was really a game filled with secrets and mysteries," Mouri says. "For example, if you get a mushroom, your body becomes big. And there are also pipes that initially seem to be just obstacles when in turn, you can actually go into it and access an underground area. It's really filled with secrets and mysteries."



Mouri took this as one of his primary inspirations when thinking about how to push the series forward, making "secrets and mysteries" one of the core concepts for Super Mario Bros. Wonder. The more Mouri looked at the way the series has progressed in the time since those original entries, he noticed the way of having secrets implemented had become "standardized." In the early days of developing this new title, he made it a mission to try to break free from the established mold.

"What we wanted to do was say – you know when you traveled down a pipe, you go to an underground secret area, and when you climb a vine, you go to a secret sky area – we wanted to create a new version of that," Mouri says. "That idea was grabbing an item and warping you to a different area. When we made it and actually showed it to Mr. Tezuka, he said, 'Well, if you're just going to warp somewhere, it's basically the same thing. Can you just change the area you're in right now?' When I heard that, I thought, 'Well, instead of just trying to transform one small part of the course, why not just go for the entire course?'"

After brainstorming ideas for this new concept, Mouri came up with ideas like having a pipe wiggle like an inchworm or tilting the entire screen in one direction, creating the concept we now know as Wonder Effects. The team wanted to come up with several strong ideas to implement in select stages to make for impactful play experiences, but Tezuka had higher ambitions for these game-changing warps. Tezuka loved the idea but thought instead of picking and choosing certain courses to include these events, they should put these transformations in every level.



At first, Mouri was incredulous at the suggestion, in part because the Wonder Flower, the item that activates the Wonder Effects, is optional to collect. "I had to think to myself, 'Are we really going to do this?'" he says. "And I thought that because what that means – having every main course have that – there's going to also be work that needs to be [done] because the gameplay experience is different once you touch the Wonder Flower and then when you don't touch the Wonder Flower. That means we have to do that for every single course, which is again, a lot of work. And hence,

75
241.0
07
10
9

I had to really ask him, 'Are we really going to do this?' And he said yes."

When in doubt, Mouri referred to his initial idea of filling the game with secrets and mysteries. He tells me he realized early on Tezuka was right: If the team really wanted to fill the game with this sense of discovery, they couldn't just deliver these Wonders in a few levels; it was necessary for every main level to feature them.

"It was a challenge to get to the point where the Wonder Effect concept really sunk in with the team," art director Masanobu Sato says. "I feel like they weren't completely sold on the idea until we decided on the main course tricks and visuals."

With such a daunting task before him, Mouri pooled the full development staff, which resulted in thousands of ideas. They then cut down to the best ideas and created prototypes for testing, with only a very small percentage of ideas making it into the final game.

During this early stage, when the team was coming up with ideas for Wonders, Tezuka wanted to give the developers free rein to be as creative as possible without any excuses, so he did not impose any deadlines. Though Tezuka does believe deadlines can help a team deliver the best product possible, he wanted to let his staff create a fully formed nucleus for the new title.

While Tezuka is reluctant to say this is an entirely new approach for Nintendo as a whole, he notes that the process for setting deadlines was at least somewhat different. "In my experience, we usually start with prototyping followed by a project proposal, and then we create a rough schedule that we adjust based on progress," he says. "The Wonder Effects in each course were the most important elements of the game, and not all of them were outlined in the initial project proposal. We intentionally withheld information about the completion timing from the team until we had more clarity and a firm grasp of the scale of gameplay that we were going to create. It is because we didn't want deadlines to discourage the team from pursuing challenges during production."

It was here that Super Mario Bros. Wonder began to truly take form and effectively transition Mario and his friends away from the New Super Mario Bros. franchise and into something entirely fresh. And with tons of imaginative ideas in tow, Tezuka and Mouri looked for inspiration from new sources.

FRESH PERSPECTIVES

As development progressed on this new game, Nintendo relied on the seasoned veterans on its staff like Tezuka and Mouri, but the newer and younger developers more than pulled their weight.

"When looking at creating a new Mario title, we actually went ahead and brought in a lot of younger people into our staff," Tezuka says. "They're, of course, developers, but they're also people who enjoy playing games, and so they wanted to create something that they themselves would enjoy as gamers. We got a lot of different ideas and different thoughts from as many people as we could within that group."

In soliciting increased feedback from the newer team members, Tezuka and Mouri started making bigger changes to the core Mario formula. Things like getting rid of the in-course timer and score system, letting you stomp on an enemy underwater, and starting back in the stage after losing a life were just some of the changes made at the suggestion of newer developers.

"The thing about developers who are new is that they're not too preoccupied with 'It was this way, so we must do it this way,'" Mouri says. "I think that there's a good side to that in that we can really hear their opinions and feedback and really re-evaluate and think what kinds of changes and what kinds of adjustments we want to make to each of those gameplay experiences."

Mouri credits many of the innovations to these newer developers, saying they could more easily recognize exactly where the franchise needed to change, while Tezuka appreciates how honest many of them are with their feedback. In playing through several stages of Super Mario Bros. Wonder, the fresh takes on the series are evident, with surprises and delights at every turn.

HERE WE GO! (AGAIN)

Super Mario Bros. Wonder whisks Mario and his friends away to the Flower Kingdom. His group is there to meet with Prince Florian, a caterpillar-like ruler with a flower-shaped crown that's not just to demonstrate his royal status in the Flower Kingdom (more on that later). Unfortunately, Florian's meeting with the Mushroom Kingdom delegation is cut short as Bowser and Kamek steal Florian's Wonder Flower.

As soon as he touches the Wonder Flower, Bowser merges with Florian's castle and begins wreaking havoc on the Flower Kingdom as a horrifying floating warship. Bowser soars over the Flower Kingdom, corrupting various parts of the once-peaceful world, including transforming the houses of Florian's royal guards, the Poplins, into prisons.

Now, Mario and his friends must venture through six distinct worlds, as well as a central area known as the Petal Isles, in order to rescue the Poplins, recover the powerful Wonder Seeds, and put a stop to Bowser's new reign of terror.

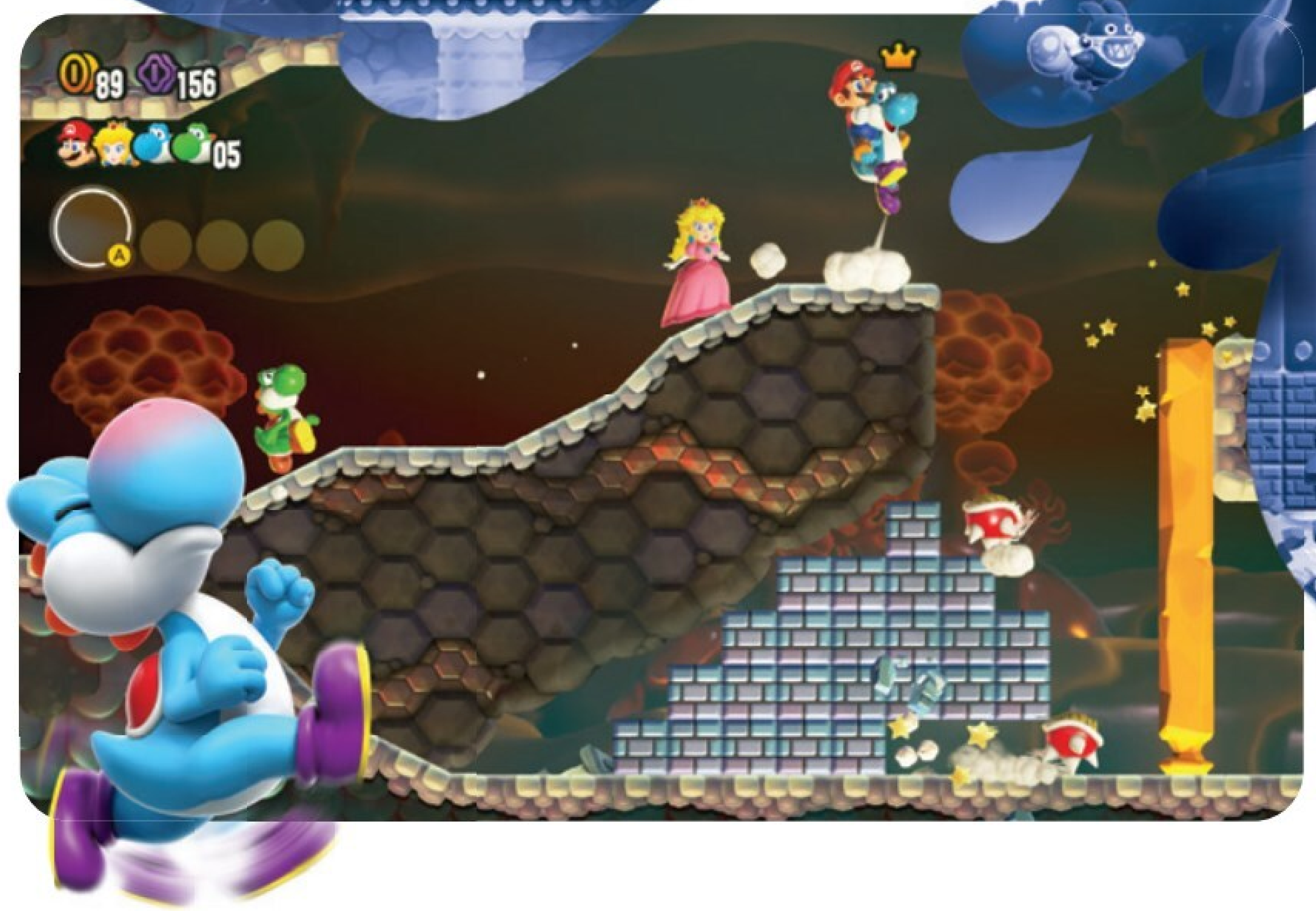
Mouri wanted to fill Super Mario Bros. Wonder with secrets and mysteries, but the other core concept he wanted to pursue from the earliest stages of development was freedom of choice. To help accomplish that, Super Mario Bros. Wonder features the largest roster of playable characters in the history of 2D Mario games. Players can choose between Mario, Luigi, Peach, Daisy, Yellow Toad, Blue Toad, Toadette, Yoshi, Red Yoshi, Yellow Yoshi, Light-Blue Yoshi, and Nabbit. All of the characters control exactly the same, with the exception of the Yoshis and Nabbit.

In order to make the game as approachable as possible, Nintendo made it so Yoshi and Nabbit don't take damage, but they can't use power-ups. Yoshi also has the ability to eat enemies and items, let other characters ride him, and use his trademark flutter jump, while Nabbit can turn power-ups into Flower Coins, the in-game currency. These Purple Coins are scattered throughout the stages and can be traded at the store for 1-Up Mushrooms, Wonder Seeds, equippable Badges, and more.

BADGE OF HONOR

Badges are perhaps the biggest expression of Mouri's desire for freedom of choice in Super Mario Bros. Wonder. Using Badges, players can customize their character with a special move or ability. "When you look at past Mario games, a lot of characters had a set of abilities; I'm talking about Peach being floaty or Luigi being able to jump high, and while that's fun, I thought that some people might want to be a little bit floaty with Mario or maybe they want to jump high with Toad," Mouri says. "Because we separated out the character from the ability, we were able to get a little bit wild with some of the abilities."

These Badges, which are equipped one at a time to Prince Florian's crown, exist in three categories. Action Badges give you moves that you can pull off on command, such as a Parachute Cap that lets you glide, a Floating High Jump that boosts your standard jump, or a Wall-Climb Jump that modifies your standard wall-jump to help you scale walls. Meanwhile, Boost Badges grant passive abilities, like one that rewards extra coins, one that starts you off with a Super Mushroom, and one that offers one free bounce out of a pit. Finally, there are Expert Badges, which are useful, but difficult-to-master abilities. Some Badges are highly specialized, such as the Dolphin Kick Badge, which provides an underwater speed boost that lets you break blocks, while others, like the Crouching High Jump, are widely applicable.

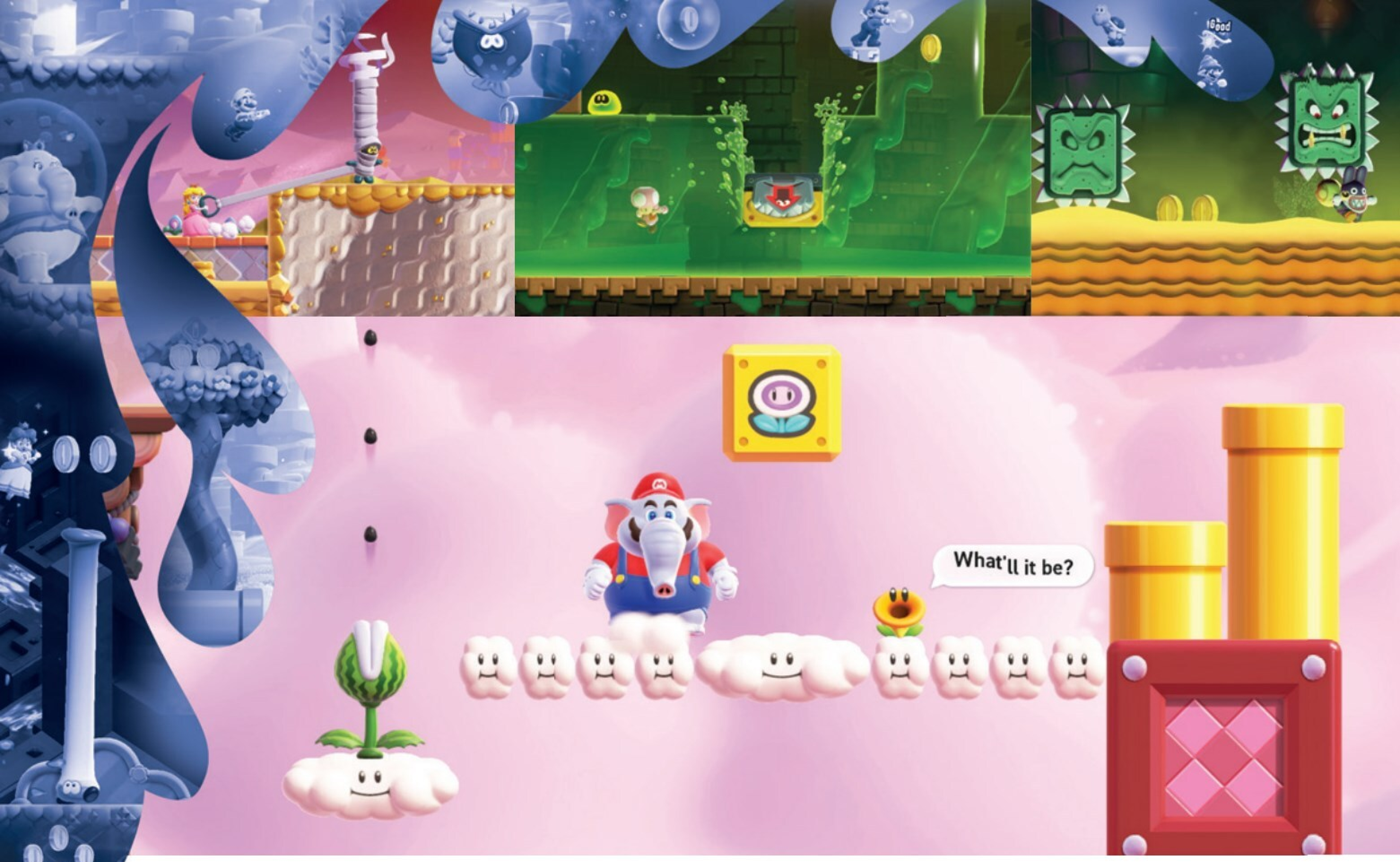


The Badge system can be used to help reach areas more easily or as a difficulty modifier. "There are Badges that are suited for supporting novice players and also Badges that kind of provide advanced players with a little bit of handicapping as they're playing the game," Mouri says. "I think this really provides a lot of options and a lot of variety for all different kinds of players."

While some Badges can be purchased in the store with Flower Coins, others must be earned. I experienced this firsthand by playing the Wall-Climb Jump challenge, which had me equip the badge and use it to reach the top of a vertical stage. It's simple enough, but it lets me master the Badge's ability, then grant it to me as an option each time I enter a course going forward.

However, it sounds as though not every Badge is so easily unlocked. "No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get the last one," Tezuka says with a chuckle. "Up until now, I have completed pretty much every single Mario game that I've worked on, but for this one I did have to have help with two courses. All the rest, I did myself."

In response, Mouri proudly proclaims he was able to get all the Badges and complete the game 100 percent, but does warn that Super Mario Bros. Wonder will be quite challenging to accomplish everything. Though the stages I played through were not among the most difficult, I experienced a wide range of challenges during my hands-on session and came away excited to experience the levels that tripped Tezuka up.



THE FEEL OF THE FLOWER KINGDOM

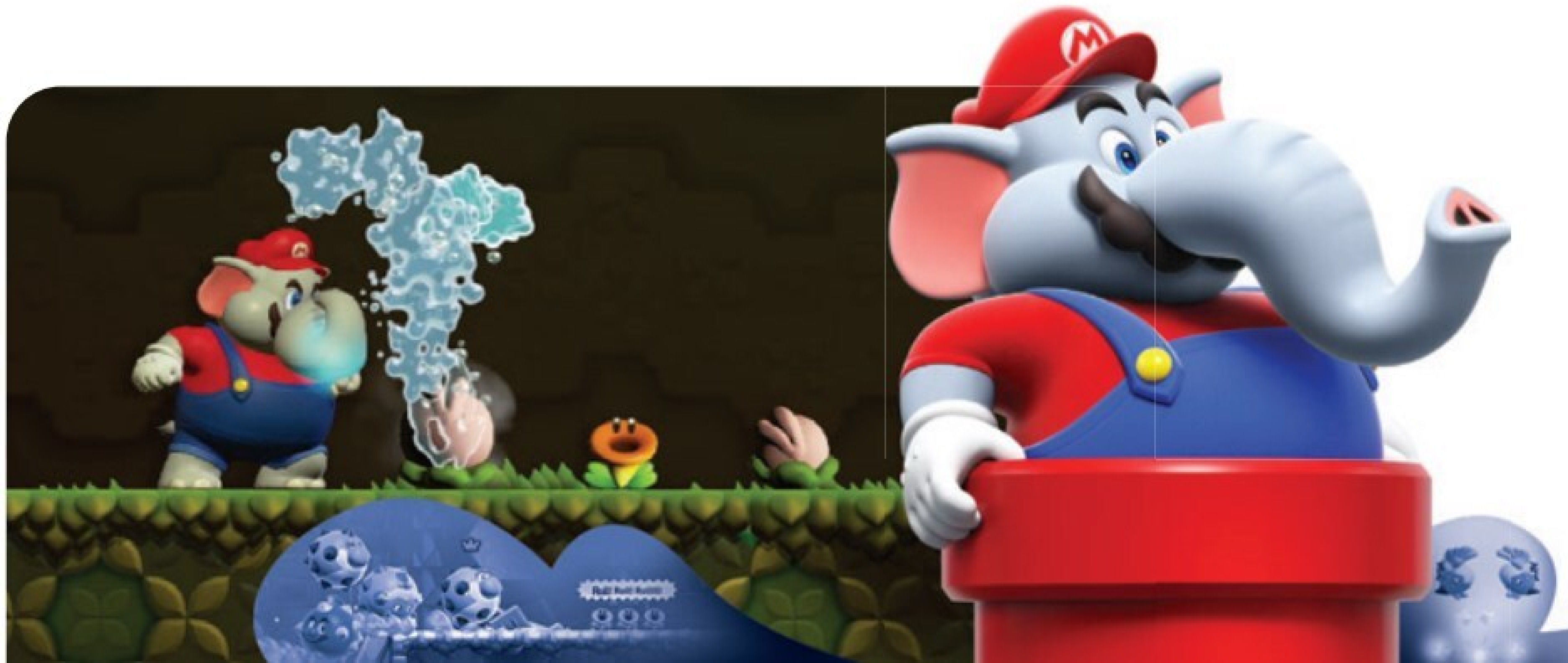
My hands-on session begins with the aptly named Welcome to the Flower Kingdom. This first level introduces many of the core components of Super Mario Bros. Wonder, including Talking Flowers. These witty plants commentate the action, give you hints about nearby secrets, and even crack jokes, injecting extra personality into the experience. They can be toggled to be text-only, voice-only, both, or turned off. They can also be switched to speak in various languages.

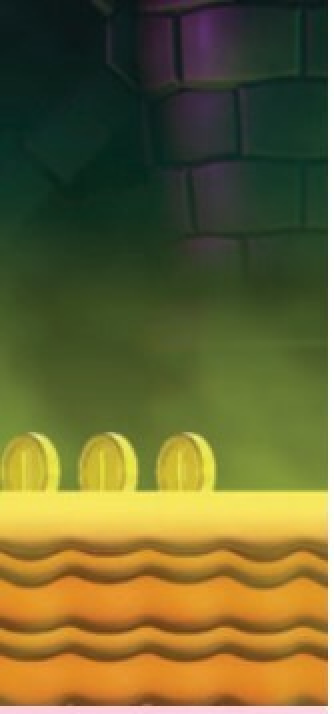
As the stage starts picking up momentum, I encounter the moment I've been waiting for: The Elephant Fruit power-up emerges from a block and I watch as Mario transforms into the new form. Elephant Mario, as Mouri explains, was born out of the desire of wanting to make Mario's body grow in size, allow him to hit blocks from the side and potentially reach new areas, and spray water to stun enemies and water plants. "To come up with a transformation that really fits with these three ideas," Mouri explains, "after a lot of consideration, really the only answer was an elephant."

Elephant Mario was a shock when we first saw him in the reveal trailer in June, but despite being an elephant, he still retains many of the core features of his iconic look. "We start [designing the elephant versions] by understanding the characters and their iconic features," art director Sato says. "For example, Mario's key color is red, and he has a large nose and a distinguished mustache. The design process starts with applying the transformation motif to a character while maintaining a balance to make sure that a character's iconic features are not lost."

The expressive nature of the characters is felt throughout the entire game, as the art style is a fresh take on the franchise, while still paying homage to the earliest titles in the series. "The artwork and pixel art from past Super Mario games has had an impact on this game," Sato says. "For example, you can find tons of clues hidden in past artwork where the artist sadly and regrettably had to give up depicting certain details due to technical constraints of the hardware. Updating these so that they hold up as modern entertainment was a big challenge for the artists."

Even the sound has more personality, from the more distinct jumping sounds to the Wonder transformation audio. "I think the sound really livens up the characters and the overall feel of each course, making the game even more fun," sound director Koji Kondo, who has also composed many of the most iconic Mario and Legend of Zelda tracks, says. "In this game, we use sound





in a way that we have never used it before. Some examples of that are how sound adds excitement during Wonder Effects, Talking Flower dialogue, and courses where various things move in sync with the music."

This comes into play as I grab my first Wonder Flower, which in this first stage's case, makes all the pipes move up and down, including one pipe that uses Mouri's initial inchworm idea to help Mario and friends move through the stage and grab hard-to-reach Flower Coins. The sequence culminates with me grabbing a Wonder Seed, this game's main collectible, which ceases the Wonder Effect. Each main course has at least two Wonder Seeds: one for completing the Wonder Effect and one for finishing the level. If a course has multiple exits, each exit will reward its own Wonder Seed.

The first level of Super Mario Bros. Wonder is easy and straightforward, but that's the role it's meant to fill. The longer I play, the more I witness the creativity at play with this new game.

EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS

The next course is Scram, Skedaddlers. This stage introduces a new enemy called Skedaddlers, who often carry items, but run away as soon as they see you. This could be an annoying gimmick for the course, but it ends up being a blast, as it turns multiple sections into thrilling chases. It culminates with the Wonder Effect, where as soon as you get the Wonder Flower, shooting stars rain down onto you as you chase a Skedaddler carrying the Wonder Seed. Because each star grants you a window of invincibility, this sequence makes you feel like a top-tier speedrunner as you blast through all obstacles en route to catching the fleeing Skedaddler.

The next stage, Bulrush Coming Through, showcases a new enemy type: Bulrushes. These bull-inspired creatures charge at you, destroying blocks and other objects in their way. There's no readily apparent way to defeat them, so the best way to handle them is to goad them into charging in the direction of an obstacle you want cleared, and then get out of their way. After using it to open a new area, I lure another into running off a ramp and smashing some blocks to reveal the Wonder Flower. After that, all I can do is hold on, as the Wonder Effect for this stage is a Bulrush stampede. I ride the Bulrush stampede all the way to the flagpole, but they run it right off the screen. After riding on top of them for a bit longer, I come to another flagpole, which counts as an alternate exit, meaning Bulrush Coming Through has three Wonder Seeds instead of the standard two.

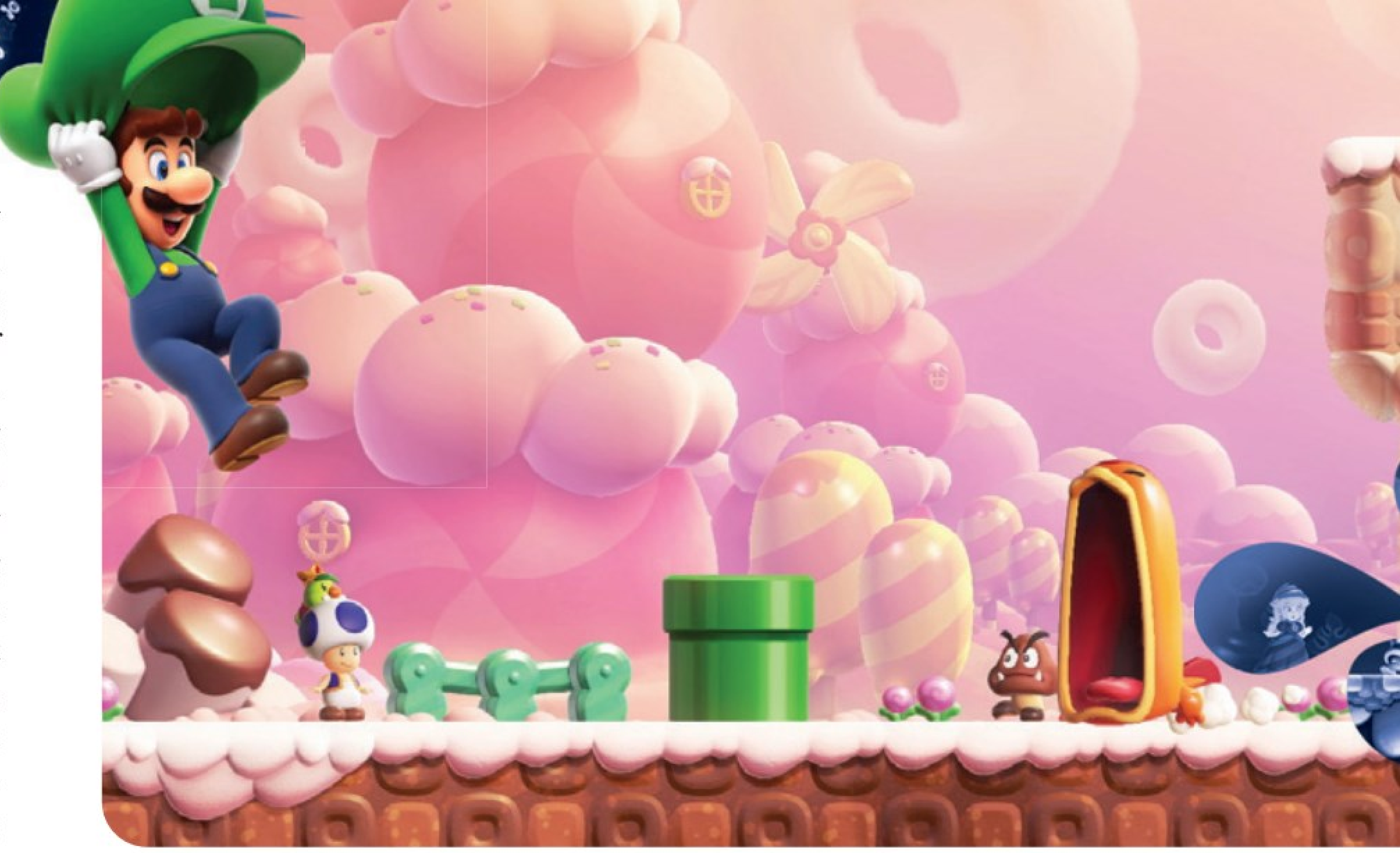
Before going on to Jewel-Block Cave, I play Trottin' Piranha Plants, a short and easy stage that falls in the category of Break Time courses. These simple levels are meant to be a breather from any surrounding difficulty and a fun, easy way to obtain a Wonder Seed more than anything else. After defeating all of the Piranha Plants in the area above Mario, I collect my Seed and I'm on to the next main level.

STRONGER TOGETHER

You can play the entirety of Super Mario Bros. Wonder in single-player or you can enjoy it alongside friends. In local settings, you can play traditional cooperative play where everyone goes through the course together like in the New Super Mario Bros. series. The biggest difference is that, outside of Yoshi, there are no interactions between players, meaning you can't pick each other up anymore and you won't accidentally bounce off each other's heads and into the nearest lava pit.

If you're not in the same room, you can play online multiplayer, which can be enjoyed with up to four players. In this, you see other players' shadows, but they don't affect your session; if they defeat an enemy in their game, it doesn't affect yours. In my online multiplayer session, I competed in the Wall-Climb Jump Badge challenge to see who could make it to the end of the stage soonest. These special challenges are excellent for this style of online multiplayer, but any course in the game can be turned into a friend race.

The final multiplayer mode is a persistent online option that can be toggled on. In this mode, you see shadows of other players currently in the course, as well as cardboard cutouts they leave, which are known as Standees. These Standees serve partially as a bragging right of "I was here," but they also allow players who lose a life to respawn at a nearby Standee. Standees can be purchased at random at the store with Flower Coins, with a ton of different options for different characters with different poses.



In Jewel-Block Cave, I find a new power-up: the Drill Mushroom. When using this new ability, Mario and his friends can dig beneath the surface of both the ground and ceiling and burrow. While this is effective at defeating enemies and breaking colorful jewel blocks in the course, it's also extremely useful for finding secrets or reaching places you couldn't otherwise. The Wonder Effect here spawns a giant Konk, which behaves similarly to the series' mainstay Thwomp enemy. You must move downward as the Konk encroaches on your position from above; the Drill Mushroom is particularly useful in this case, as several colorful blocks impede your progress.

Maw-Maw Mouthful is flooded with, as the name suggests, Maw-Maws. These big-mouthed beasts charge at anything that pops up in front of them, including playable characters, power-ups, and enemies. You can get the new Bubble Flower power-up from a block, but if you're not careful, a Maw-Maw will eat it before you can grab it. Once I get the Bubble Flower, I immediately see the utility, as you can defeat enemies with the bubble projectiles and use them as makeshift platforms to reach new areas.

The Bubble Flower was inspired by the Bubble Baby Yoshi, a holdable character that could trap enemies in bubbles in New Super Mario Bros. U. However, Mouri wanted to improve upon the mechanic. "Part of the mechanics of that character was that you had to keep the Y button held down to be able to use it, and we thought that was something that could use a little improvement," he says. "As an extension of trying to improve that feature is how we came up with the idea of the Bubble Flower and then ultimately, Bubble Mario."

Maw-Maw Mouthful culminates with one of the most interesting Wonder Effects: The player characters transform into Goombas, who Maw-Maws seem to have an insatiable appetite for. Here, you must avoid being eaten by hiding in the trees and then working your way towards the Wonder Seed by riding various platforms that are accessible to you as a Goomba who can't jump. The next Wonder Effect isn't any less strange, as I play Bloomps of the Desert Skies, where Mario transforms into Balloon Mario and must navigate a gauntlet of enemies and obstacles on his way to the Wonder Seed.

NEW FRONTIERS

Condarts Away is the first of three stages exclusive to my play session. Condarts are menacing birds that lie in wait for you to walk nearby, then fly straight at you like a dart to a dartboard. Like many of the enemies in Super Mario Bros. Wonder, you can manipulate them to use their attacks to your advantage, as they can break through blocks. This stage also houses a special area with Zip Tracks, where Mario essentially grinds or ziplines his way across. However, my favorite part is the Wonder Effect, which shifts the perspective to a top-down view, and you must avoid enemies while you gather Flower Coins and seek out the Wonder Seed.

The next exclusive course I experience is Where The Rrrumbas Rule. This cavern-based stage is full of sentient boulders that roll your way and destroy anything in their path. The course also includes Topple Rocks, tall wall-like pillars that Mario can push over to knock out enemies or clear paths. Knocking them over is extremely satisfying, especially when you wall-jump off them. The Wonder Effect in this level is perhaps

A RIVALRY RENEWED

In the 1990s, Sonic the Hedgehog was the sole series able to briefly challenge Mario's claim to the platforming throne, and it would seem the series' fates are once again intertwined. Sonic Superstars, an all-new 2D game that features modern visuals, unique powers, and cooperative play, arrives on all consoles (including Nintendo Switch) on October 17, just days before Super Mario Bros. Wonder brings a similar core idea on October 20.

"I think it's an interesting coincidence," Super Mario Bros. Wonder producer Takashi Tezuka says. "We've been creating 2D action games for a long time and we, of course, want as many players as possible to enjoy those games. We're looking forward to as many people as possible having the opportunity to play these 2D side-scrolling action games, Mario and otherwise."

my favorite of my demo, as Mario is transformed into Spike Ball Mario and rolls through the stage as a wrecking ball of destruction, complete with bowling-pin sound effects. The feeling of momentum is fantastic, and it's a great power trip as you roll through legions of enemies, blocks, and other obstacles.

Countdown to Drop Down serves as the grand send-off to my hands-on session. This course is perhaps the most difficult level of my demo, as it's full of Dropdown Countdown Lifts, special platforms that give way after a set number of characters land on them; even if you're playing single-player and jump too rapidly, the platform will drop you into the pit below. This is particularly challenging when playing local co-op since multiple characters are more likely to hit the platform too many times and trigger the drop-down effect. The difficulty ratchets up once Lakitu starts dropping Spinies down from above, triggering the countdown; I found the best tactic was to take him out and then use his cloud to soar ahead. This stage also features Melon Piranha Plants, special enemies that spit out melon seeds that can push you around or you can jump on them like enemies to get a small boost.

The final Wonder Effect I experience is a free fall toward the Wonder Seed, with Super Stars falling alongside you. It's a more straightforward Wonder Effect, but it's still a fun change-up from the main conceits of the larger course. I make it through Countdown to Drop Down, Wonder Seeds in hand, and my gameplay demo ends.

A NEW WORLD OF WONDER

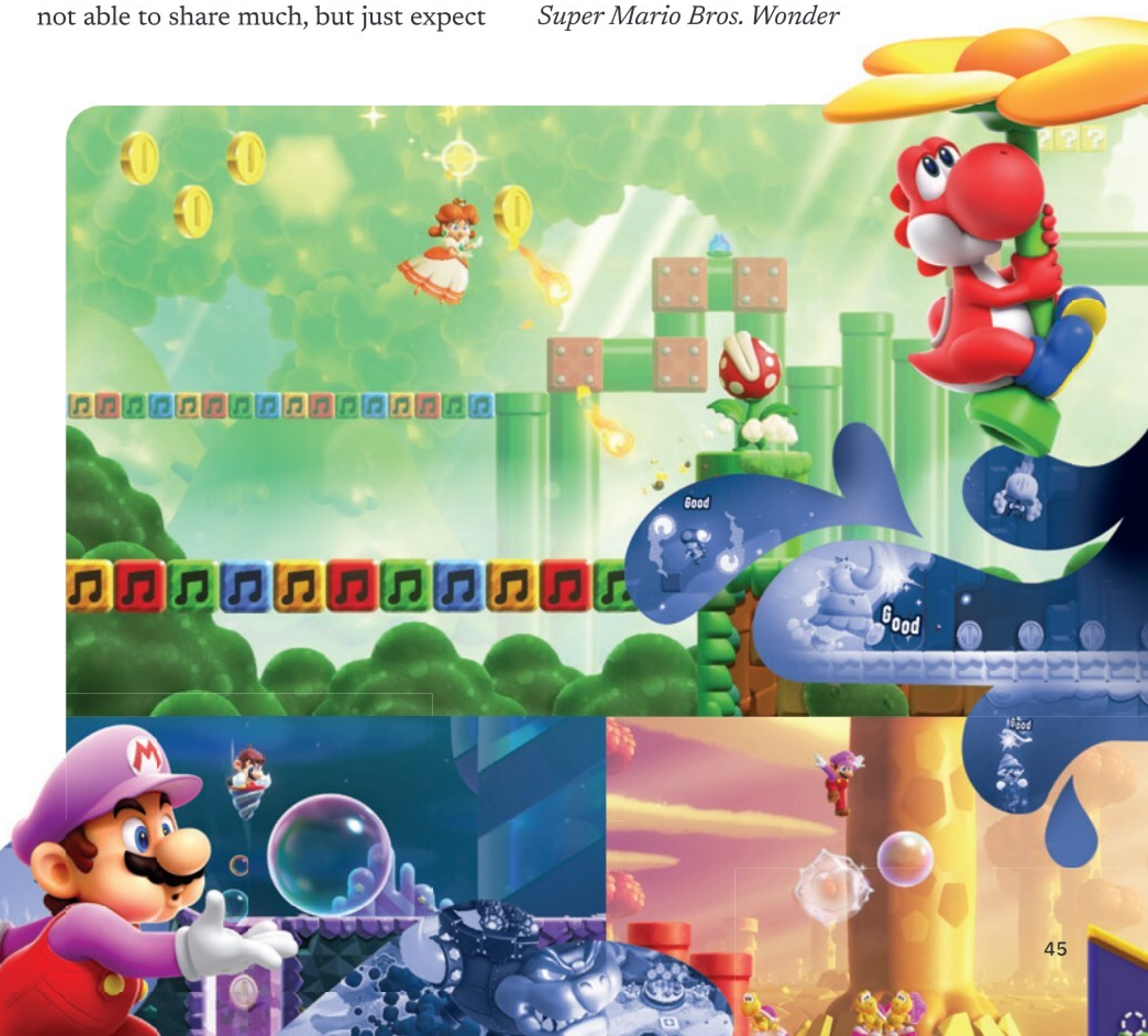
I unfortunately did not get to experience any boss battles, but if Bowser's transformation into an actual castle is any indication, we might be in for some wild encounters. "Right off the bat, we felt that the boss battles themselves also needed some kind of new coat of paint," Mouri says. "When I was considering what kind of boss battle experiences would fit this title, I came to the conclusion that they would have to be using the powers of Wonder. This is stepping into spoiler territory, so I'm not able to share much, but just expect a lot of Wonder-induced attacks."

With Super Mario Bros. Wonder arriving this month, Nintendo is eager to see what fans think. In talking with Tezuka and Mouri, their anticipation is palpable, particularly when I ask them what to expect when the final game arrives.

"What you've played is just a really, very thin slice of what's in store and there are a lot wilder, more inventive experiences in the full version," Mouri says with a grin. "More than that would be a spoiler, so I just want to encourage you to give it a try and really experience it for yourself."

Based on my hands-on experience with Super Mario Bros. Wonder, I already had extremely high hopes for what feels like the most creative Super Mario Bros. game since Yoshi's Island on SNES. However, after hearing how the game came to exist and what methods allowed Nintendo to create the best version of Super Mario Bros. Wonder possible, it truly feels like Nintendo has once again captured the magic that made so many gamers fall in love with Nintendo's mascot over the last four decades. ■

Visit GameInformer.com/MarioWonder for deeper dives into the making of Super Mario Bros. Wonder



AN
EXPAND

Impressions and revelations of Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

by
MARCUS STEWART

DED REUNION

Final Fantasy VII Remake felt like the realization of an impossible dream when it launched in 2020. Not only did it feel willed into existence after years of fan requests, but it largely lived up to sky-high expectations based on its generally positive reception. Tack on a good story expansion with the Yuffie-focused Intermission, and the series is riding a wave of momentum into its second chapter, Rebirth.

To learn how the sequel is shaping up, I visited Square Enix's Los Angeles studio to play two slices of Final Fantasy VII Rebirth: a flashback sequence of the ill-fated Mt. Nibel mission and an open-world segment on the outskirts of Junon. I then spoke with director Naoki Hamaguchi, producer Yoshinori Kitase, and creative director Tetsuya Nomura to seek answers to some burning questions, such as how much narrative ground Rebirth covers, the decision behind splitting it between two discs, and if there's any form of data transfer between Remake and Rebirth.

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** February 29

CLEARING THE AIR

Rebirth launches February 29, a couple of months shy of Remake's fourth anniversary. According to Hamaguchi, Remake's development cycle was around four years, making the turnaround for Rebirth, a much larger game, relatively quick. It's especially impressive since Square developed and released the PlayStation 5-exclusive Intermission story expansion and Intergrade upgrade in between. Hamaguchi credits working on Intermission/Intergrade for the smoother dev cycle, as it allowed the designers to become more intimately familiar with the PS5 (which Rebirth is exclusive to) and finish Rebirth within a similar timeframe despite having what he describes as "an immense volume of content" compared to Remake.

The game is so big that Square is splitting it between two discs. Hamaguchi states Rebirth is 150GB, with 100 on one disc and 50 on the other. However, you won't be swapping discs like fans did with the original PlayStation game. Due to the PS5 architecture, players will first install the entire game by inserting both discs. After that, only one of them will be needed to play the full game.

Hamaguchi explains that the decision to split Rebirth in this way had less to do with rekindling nostalgia and more as a method to preserve the team's lofty vision for it. Square had always envisioned Rebirth as a massive, highly detailed world more immersive than Remake's revamped Midgar. Thus, squeezing it on a single Blu-ray would have forced the designers to scale back on content and ideas, so doubling up on discs became the obvious solution.

Square Enix also confirms there will be no shared progression between any version of Remake and Rebirth. That means you won't be bringing over gear and materia earned in Remake. Although returning players will be starting from scratch, Hamaguchi does reveal that players with Remake/Intergrade saved data will receive a summon materia as a special bonus upon starting Rebirth.

In terms of the narrative roadmap, Nomura also confirmed that Rebirth's story runs up to the end of the Forgotten Capitol (a.k.a. The City of the Ancients). However, as anyone who finished Remake knows, Nomura stresses that Rebirth will not follow events in the same order or manner as the original.

THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

My first demo is a shorter, linear slice set years before Remake's events. Cloud, still a member of SOLDIER, climbs Mt. Nibel guided by Tifa and accompanied by his mentor and future nemesis, Sephiroth. At this point, Sephiroth has not yet gone off the deep end, while this younger Cloud has an uncharacteristically chipper attitude. The group is making its way to a mako reactor at Nibel's summit, with copious monster battles reacclimating me to combat.

Rebirth plays identically to Remake; its entertaining hybrid of stylish action and turn-based mechanics remains a thrilling and strategic treat with a new wrinkle: Synergy Skills. These attacks combine the might of two party members to unleash a flashy tag team assault, provided you have an ATB bar to spend. Cloud and Sephiroth's Synergy Skill, for example, is called Dualblade Dance, and it plays out as a cinematic and flashy display of tandem swordplay as both warriors eviscerate a target.

Synergy Skills encourage players to experiment with different party combinations. On that front, you can now create saved party lineups that you can instantly swap between in-game. Need to change your Cloud/Barrett/Aerith crew to Cloud/Red XIII/Tifa? It's just a button press away, saving you trips to the menu.

Like the previous game, hitting the D-pad switches control of your party members. I do this often because playing as Sephiroth is a blast. The silver-haired swordsman is a powerhouse boasting flurries of lighting-quick, wide-reaching slash attacks, a teleporting dodge that warps him to and from targets, and his powerful Octaslash Limit Break. I get the best of both him and Cloud by tackling the area's boss, the many-legged Materia Guardian, in a spectacular bout.

Distance Traveled 894.59m

What's Up With Vincent?

Vincent Valentine's brief appearance was an exciting highlight of the Rebirth story trailer at September's PlayStation State of Play. We won't reveal the character's nature for newcomers, but he, like Yuffie, was an optional party member in the original game, so I asked Square Enix if that would be the case again. Creative director Tetsuya Nomura confirms Vincent is part of Rebirth's primary campaign this time, but, unfortunately, he won't be playable.

Instead, the brooding warrior simply accompanies the party, much like Red XIII did in Remake. Nomura explains this is the case because, in the original, Vincent joins the party during the backend of the story. Based on that answer, it sounds like we won't be wielding Vincent's power ourselves until the yet-to-be-titled third entry arrives.

A NEW OLD WORLD

The next demo drops me into a coastal open-world section outside of the city of Junon – or technically Under Junon, the name of the peaceful fishing village located nearby. I have the full party of Cloud, Tifa, Aerith, Barrett, and the now-playable Red XIII. While walking works, I opt for hitting R1 to call a fleet of chocobos for us to ride. Red XIII semi-awkwardly mounted on his feathery steed is an unintentionally hilarious sight. Not only do chocobos expedite ground travel, but they can also cross certain bodies of water to reach treasure-laden islands.

Though I can head straight for Under Junon, I opt to explore the beautifully detailed world and encounter World Intel missions. Entering designated zones beckons a mysterious, A.I.-like entity named MAI to challenge me to defeat a particular enemy to gather data on it. Defeating these designated foes earns rewards such as gear and crafting materials, and fulfilling objectives such as winning within a time limit or pressuring/staggering the enemy sweetens the pot.

Speaking of crafting, a new menu feature called the Item Transmuter lets you transform collected materials into helpful items such as various health potions, phoenix downs, and more. Doing so earns transmuter EXP, raising your general crafting proficiency.

Baby chocobos also roam these lands, and you'll want to follow these adorable critters when you spot them as they'll guide you to fallen Chocobo Stops. Raising these signs upright turns them into fast travel points and rewards golden plumes that can be exchanged at ranches for gear to outfit your chocobos. Oh, and you can also pet the baby chocobos once the job is done, so be sure to do that.

When I arrive at Under Junon, the party is halted by Rhonda, the village's mayor and sheriff. Rhonda's identification scanner immediately pulls up the party's substantial bounties, but, thankfully, she's no friend of Shinra. Instead, Rhonda invites the group to rest at the nearby inn, but a young girl immediately yells for help. Following her leads me to the docks where Yuffie, in a canoe, is under attack by... a friendly dolphin? Actually, the dolphin is there to guide Yuffie to safety; the actual threat is a giant sea serpent called the Terror of the Deep that now threatens the town, prompting Cloud and Co. to intervene.

The resulting boss battle offers the biggest test of my skill. Not only can this beast dive under the docks to launch surprise attacks, but it can trap allies inside orbs of water, which you must attack to free them. Unleashing a barrage of individual abilities, Synergy Skills, and Limit Breaks eventually topple the beast in a lengthy battle.

While it's tough to get a sense of the narrative by playing two out-of-context sections, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth refines the combat I loved in its predecessor. The open-world activities were decent diversions, and while I'm curious to see what else Square Enix fills its worlds with, the main narrative will always be the biggest draw next to the action. And so far, Rebirth has the combat chops and story intrigue to have me counting the days until it arrives. ■

Jack and his katana are back in GHOSTRUNNER 2, this time with a motorbike, and we spoke to developer One More Level about enhancing its cyberpunk parkour paradise for the sequel

Bringing a Bike to a Gun Fight

by Wesley LeBlanc

The first-person action parkour subgenre of games is a small but great one. It features the likes of EA's Mirror's Edge series, Respawn Entertainment's Titanfall franchise, and One More Level's Ghostrunner – one of my favorite games. I first played this game two years after its 2020 release, in the summer of July 2022, jobless and depressed. It felt good to exist in a world where capitalistic business executives make inhumane decisions about the last of humanity living in their Dharma Tower, except instead of suffering under their thumb, I, or rather, protagonist Ghostrunner, took a katana straight to the top to bring it all down. The game concludes with humanity free and Ghostrunner liberated from the A.I.-powered Cybervoid trappings under a new name: Jack.

I played a roughly 30-minute vertical slice of Ghostrunner 2, the upcoming sequel hitting current-gen consoles and PC later this month, and came away impressed. This demo didn't consist of much – short tutorial sequences, a few enemy-filled arenas to parkour destructively through, and a finale I'll get to shortly. But this demo was also precisely what I needed: confirmation that Ghostrunner 2 is, in fact, more of this excellent world One More Level crafted three years ago.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER 505 Games **DEVELOPER** One More Level
RELEASE October 26

here to serve

It's Good to be Jack

Immediately, Ghostrunner 2 just feels right. It's fast as hell, jaw-droppingly gorgeous with neon-lit rain turning the glass of skyscrapers into cyberpunk watercolor canvases, and incredibly tactile. Core to the entire experience of Ghostrunner 2, though, is its parkour. It feels just as good as Ghostrunner, perhaps even better, but features some tweaks studio head and CEO Szymon Bryła describes as an evolution of the series' formula, not a revolution.

"You will see that [evolution] on each layer, in gameplay, visuals, the combat system, and many others," he tells me.

Gameplay director Radosław Ratusznik says the team knew it couldn't swap out Jack's parkour skill set with something new, instead opting to improve on what's already there. "The player playing the first game feels at home playing the second Ghostrunner, but for the newcomers and the people who like to experiment with their playstyle, there are new ways to play," Ratusznik says.

One of the biggest and most immediately impactful changes is the new blocking mechanic. You can deflect bullets in the first Ghostrunner, but only after unlocking the specific ability, and even then, you have to time the ability's use with the bullet's contact to do so. Ghostrunner 2 features bullet-blocking, activated by holding down a button. It features a gauge, which prevents you from blocking forever, but it's enough time to get a feel for what's happening in the otherwise lightning-fast combat playing out around you.

Ratusznik says blocking works really well for players who struggled in the first game. But it's optional – veteran Ghostrunner players can stick to the in-and-out-style of combat required in the first game. I integrate the block easily into my playstyle, using it to cover Jack from an onslaught of machine gun fire while scoping out other enemies I can take out with a hop, dash, slash, and a couple of shuriken throws. What I like most is blocking feels optional, even in the puzzle-like combat arenas.

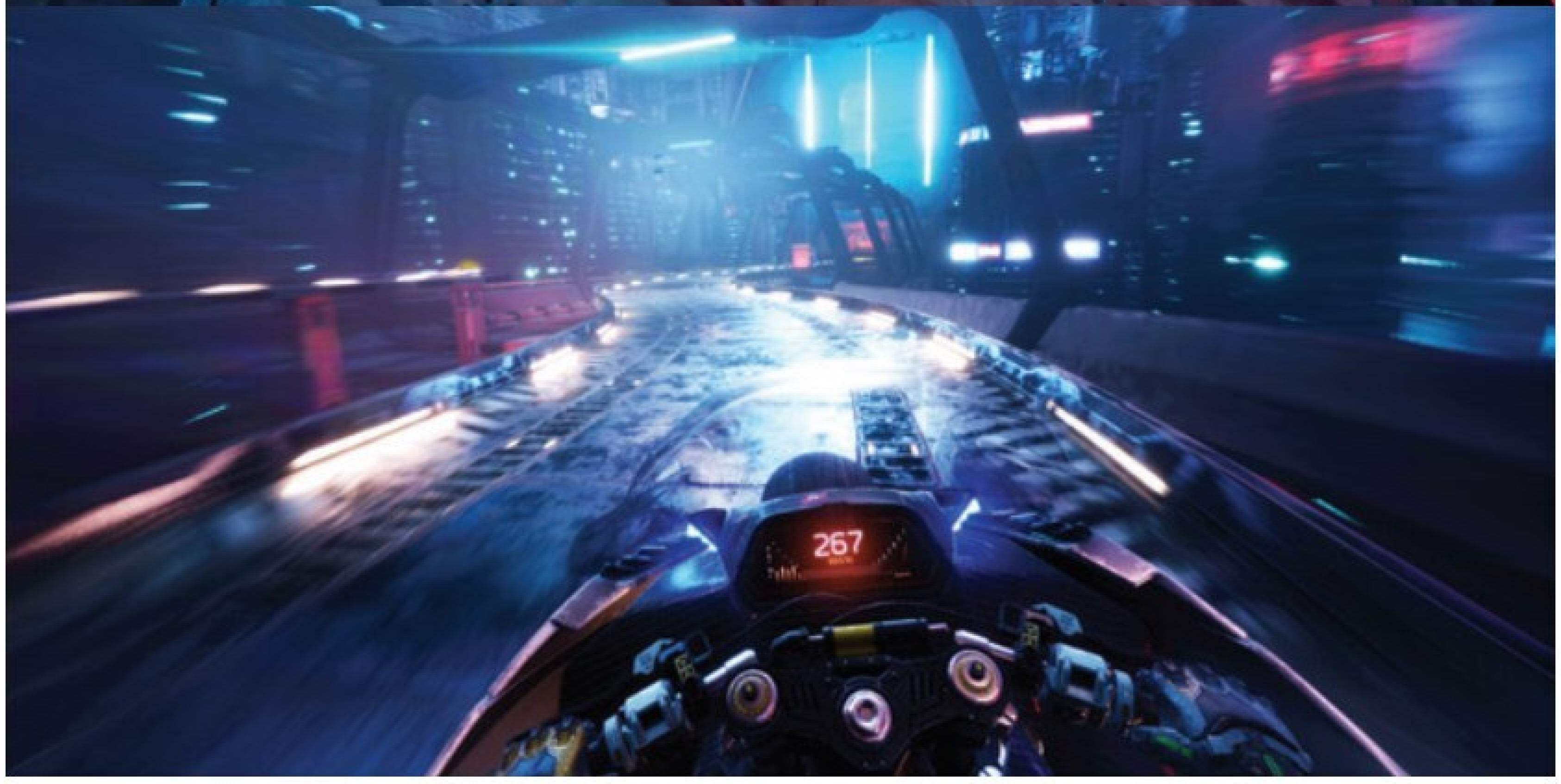
Cyberpu-zzle

"It's more like, 'Try different options,'" Ratusznik tells me. "You now have access to abilities that you can use quite often, not like in the first game where there were only ultimate abilities that you could use not so often. [So] now you have a chance to somehow connect all these mechanics together and mix them how you want, and it's really satisfying when you are successful with that. And of course, you are improving after each restart; you are becoming better and better, and then you reach the sweet spot where you know everything about the game and can use all your tools that we provide and feel really powerful."

In one puzzle, I use a special force-like push ability to move an air vent that shoots Jack into the air near an opening in a wall. I jump on it and, after being shot into the air, quickly equip a shuriken to hit a switch through the opening, which opens the door to move forward. It's a familiar puzzle in the world of Ghostrunner, and I smile at its return. The game is a first-person action game, but it's as much a puzzle game, too. Beyond puzzles like the one I describe above, every combat scenario is a puzzle because of the game's difficulty.

If Jack is hit once by a sword, bullet, shockwave, or something else, he dies. Every attack, movement, dash, slow-mo in-air directional shift, and grapple matters because it's one piece of the equation that takes you from X to Y and finally, to Z. That excellent combat formula returns in arenas even bigger than the ones in the first game and in other, smaller areas where enemies await.

here to serve



"At first, when developing [Ghostrunner 1], that was new to us," Ratusznik tells me, remarking on the team discovering that its first-person action parkour game also plays like a puzzle game. "When developing a top-down game [referring to One More Level's 2019 game, God's Trigger], you are able to plan your action before entering a room. Like in Hotline Miami, you can check what's in front of you but here, when entering a room, everything is new for you. You have to run through the arena and check for enemies and see their placement. When entering new areas, it's sure you will die."

But the beauty of death in Ghostrunner is now you know what's coming and how it's coming. So you try again and probably die again, but this third time, you switch up your tactics. "What works? What doesn't? If I attack this enemy first, I can throw a shuriken to that explosive barrel to take those two out before hopping onto the zipline above to take out the tankier guy up here." These are the kinds of thoughts going through my head multiple times in this short preview, and they're exactly what One More Level wants me to think while playing, Ratusznik and Bryła say, calling Ghostrunner 2 "a super-fast puzzle game."

A New Set of Wheels

When developing this sequel, the team knew it needed to up the ante in several ways, both in combat and in its puzzle sequences. And while it tackled this by evolving what's already there, it added something brand new: a motorbike. After just 10 minutes sitting in the driver's seat, I already love it.

"We decided that Ghostrunner was a really fast-paced game and asked ourselves, 'Alright, what if we want to have something even faster than Jack?'," Bryła says. "We decided, 'What if we have a motorcycle in the game and use it as a tool to go from one point to another and use it in the outside world?'"

Almost immediately after using the motorbike, it's clear it's One More Level's best addition. As I barrel down a futuristic highway, using my controller's right trigger to throttle it forward, I must think quickly. There's an in-world timer I have to stay ahead of to remain alive. There are jumps to hit, but I can only clear the gap if I boost off the ramp first. There are unavoidable barriers before me until I realize this motorbike can ride on the circular walls to avert them altogether. The motorbike feels like an extension of Jack, and I look forward to seeing how else it's used. One More Level teases sequences where Jack will have to jump off the motorbike mid-air to slash a switch that opens a pathway ahead and land back on the motorbike to advance, and I can't wait to see this and the inevitable *Akira*-slide that will accompany these moments.

"It was more like, 'Okay, let's not treat this too seriously, let's prototype it first,'" Ratusznik tells me. "We knew we wanted to move away from the Tower for a lot of the game [and] have levels outside the Tower. [Jack] wouldn't travel too far [on foot] so we gave him something to travel there faster."

He says they knew right away the type of transportation Jack needed would be a motorbike, which has a flashy reveal moment in-game. Bryła says the motorbike is already a big part of cyberpunk media and culture, so adding it was a no-brainer. It was also a no-brainer to ignore physics during the motorbike sections, too, he adds, remarking that arcade racing games like Mario Kart inspire it.

"It's always about connecting to Ghostrunner 2's gameplay," Bryła says. "We are wall-running; let's add wall-riding to the bike, but let's not put too much attention into physics and it being realistic. We took a pure arcade-ish approach because you need to have fun, not simulate a real motorbike, and I think it's a good addition. It makes for a really fresh approach to Ghostrunner."

Ready for More

The bike is the breakout star of my short preview with Ghostrunner 2, but it's also the most prominent addition; I'm not surprised it's the major takeaway from my time with the sequel. What I want out of Ghostrunner 2 is more – more of Jack's story, more characters to interact with, more of this dour but beautiful cyberpunk world to explore, and thousands more enemies to parkour around and slash through. So far, Ghostrunner 2 is delivering on that, and new additions like the bike, blocking, a new in-world hub to talk to characters in-person (not as floating heads like in the first game), and more have me yearning for the game's release this month when I can go beyond just a meager 30 minutes of play. Jack is back and I couldn't be more excited. ■

Creature Feature

Capturing the curious story of Palworld

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
(20-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Pocketpair
DEVELOPER Pocketpair
RELEASE 2024
(Early Access)

Three words come to mind when looking at Palworld:

↓ Chief Dev Hiroto Matsutani (right), Founder/CEO Takuro Mizobe (middle), Chief Artist Daiki Kizu (left)

Pokémon, absurdity, and ambition. Since its official reveal in June 2021, Palworld has raised eyebrows with its vibrant, expansive world teeming with dozens of monsters ripe for catching but in greater fidelity than Pokémon's recent entries. In addition to capturing them and harnessing their abilities in battle, you can also wield realistic firearms and other weapons to blast them apart or, more hilariously, arm your cuddly critters with some serious heat.

"Pokémon with guns" has become the shorthand description of Palworld, but the experience packs in survival mechanics, base-building, a central narrative, and other bells and whistles. With so many promises, some have deemed Palworld too good to be true, a sentiment its Tokyo-based developer Pocketpair finds puzzling.

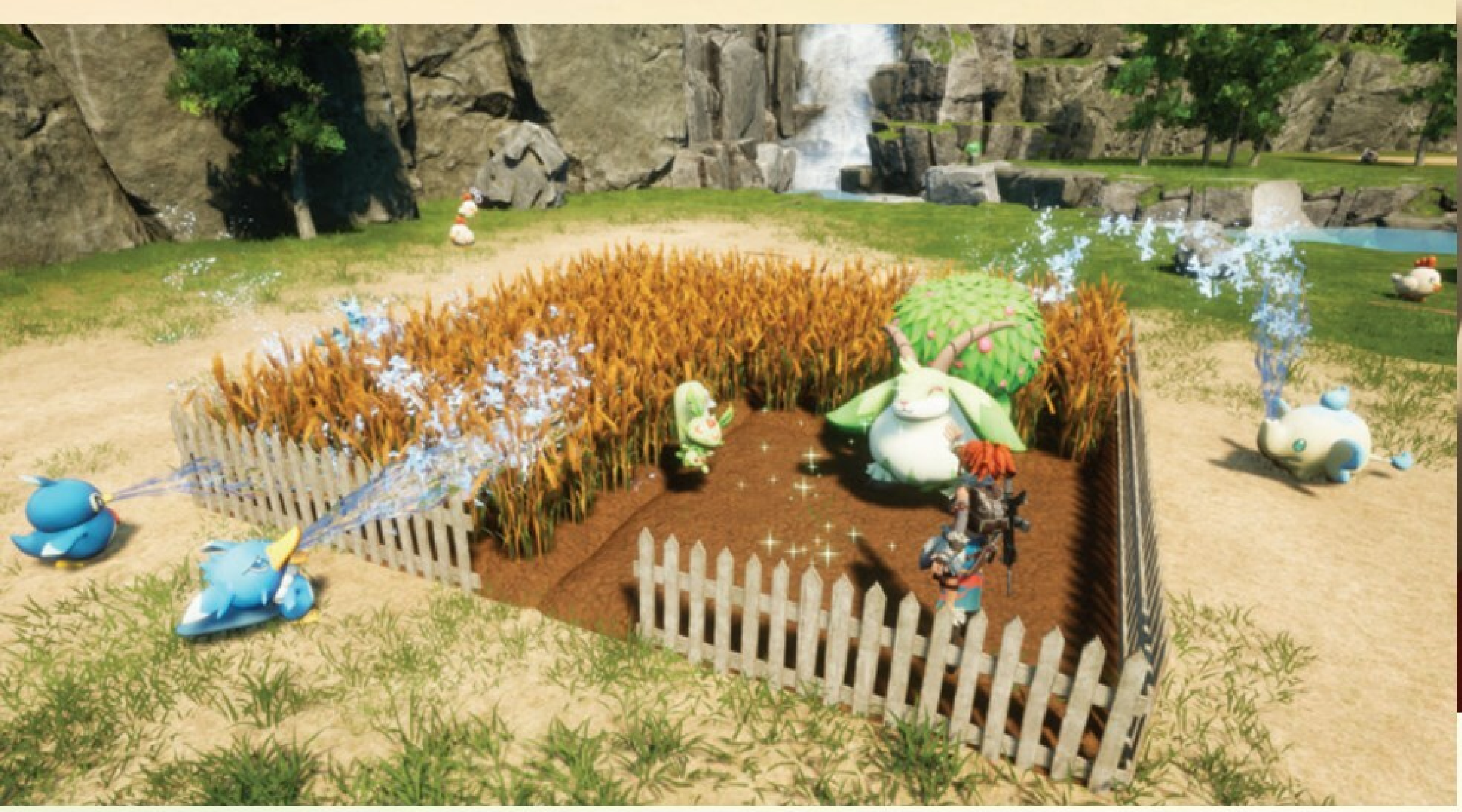
"Palworld is not a 'fake game,'" Pocketpair founder and CEO Takuro Mizobe tells me over email. "We are really surprised that some people say that."

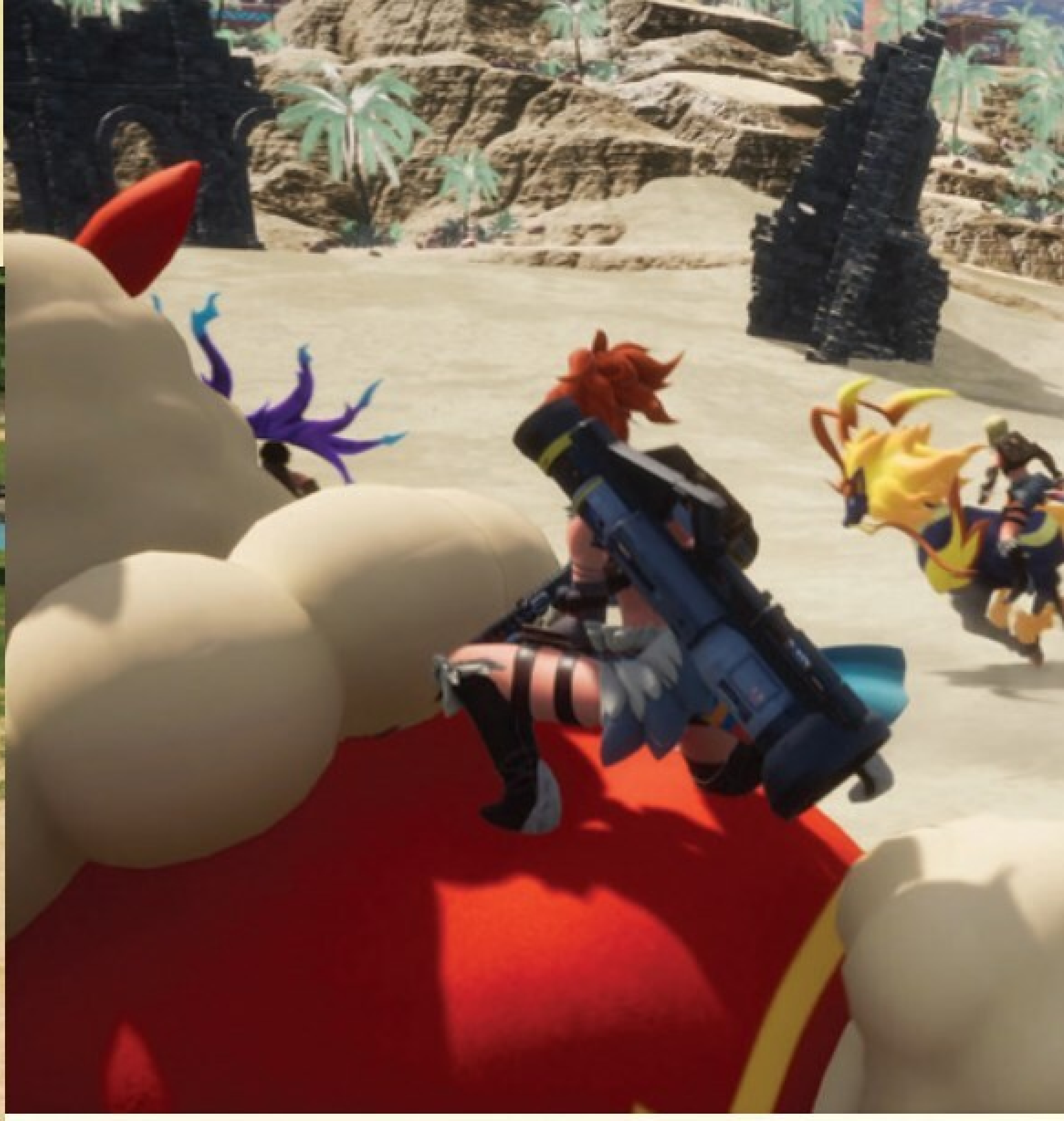
Palworld hits Steam Early Access in January, giving skeptical players a chance to see just how real the game is. But despite Pocketpair releasing numerous gameplay videos, an air of mystery still surrounds Palworld. How does its sizable feature list blend into a cohesive experience? Where did this wacky idea come from in the first place? Perhaps most importantly, just who the heck is Pocketpair?

The answer to the last question begins with Mizobe. A lifelong fan of video games, the NES ignited his childhood love for the medium before he graduated to the Super Nintendo. Mizobe says the turning point came when he discovered free games available through the internet in elementary school, which allowed him to sample a variety of genres easily. His broad palette is evident in his short list of all-time favorite games, which range from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time to Age of Empires to Serious Sam to Soldat, a free multiplayer action game. This exposure set him on the path of becoming an indie developer; he created his first game at 11 years old, which won awards at his school.

Fast-forward some years, and Mizobe, now a university student at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, got his first taste of professional game development by participating in the Nintendo Game Seminar. From 2005 to 2014 (with a break between '11 and '12), the yearly event invited Japanese game design students to learn the tricks of the trade and then work in teams to create an original title. The cream of the crop would then be released as free downloads on platforms like DS Download Play or the Wii U eShop. For the 2010 edition, Mizobe and his college friends created The Tentai Show, where players use black and white holes to absorb incoming meteors before they strike Earth. It was released as DSiWare in Japan in 2011.

Crime in progress





In 2012, Mizobe graduated from university. He would spend a few years working "normal" jobs like JP Morgan Securities before founding Pocketpair in 2015. The team released its first title in 2019: Overdungeon, a real-time tower defense card battler that garnered a generally positive reception from players. For its second game, Pocketpair tackled something a bit more ambitious. Enter Craftopia, a game that feels like the precursor to Palworld. It, too, is a sprawling open-world survival game boasting features such as farming, crafting, dungeon crawling, base-building, pet breeding, and multiplayer. Craftopia has been playable in Steam Early Access since 2020, so it's technically still in development. Despite this, Pocketpair is tackling perhaps its most ambitious title yet in Palworld.

Mizobe tells me Pocketpair develops games in a style that borrows ideas from others the team enjoys playing. Overdungeon takes clear influence from Slay the Spire and Clash Royale, while Craftopia has elements of Zelda, Harvest Moon, and a litany of survival games. Palworld draws from games like Pokémon, Age of Empires, Grand Theft Auto, Elden Ring, Valheim, and Fortnite to create what Mizobe calls a "unique gaming experience that is different from existing games."

Palworld unfolds on the Palpagos Island in the Pacific Ocean. Strange monsters called Pals, of over 100 varieties, occupy this tropical land undiscovered by humankind for generations. That eventually changed, and now various factions have set up shop in pursuit of their own interests. Players control an explorer who washes ashore on the island following a shipwreck. Thus, survival is your primary goal, and you need the Pals' help to accomplish this.

Pals are based on real animals and cultural myths from places like Europe, China, and Egypt. They come in several attributes: Neutral, Flame, Water, Grass, Electric, Frost, Earth, Dark, and Dragon. Resistances and vulnerabilities follow the rock/paper/scissor format of Pokémon: Water is resistant to Flame, for example. However, Pals can learn attacks opposite their types, so you can teach a Flame move to a Water Pal. Players can also breed Pals to create new species. This opens the door to a plethora of possible combinations, and while not all of them result in a completely new creature, others carry the traits of their parents. Mizobe says designing so many uniquely talented Pals, including the long list of breeding offspring, has been the most formidable development challenge.

Pals roam freely, with players catching them by blasting them with weapons, like guns, to weaken them. After that, you toss a blue spherical device to capture targets. Pals can then be used in battle, and the number you can use at a time varies depending on the situation. You can let Pals handle combat by issuing commands or picking them up and using them like living firearms. Pals also come with their own unique partner skills and abilities.

Your non-living arsenal includes clubs, bows, and spears to heavy gun weapons like shotguns, ARs, miniguns, and rocket launchers. As effective as these killing machines can be, some Pals can't be beaten using conventional weaponry. Pocketpair doesn't elaborate, only teasing that these sturdier Pals require more clever methods to defeat them.

Outside of battle, you can put Pals to work farming crops to cook beneficial dishes and constructing buildings and factories to create settlements. In fact, some Pals are better specialized for labor than fighting. Trailers have shown assembly lines of cute critters building weapons and looking decidedly unhappy about it. This plays into the game's dark humor. You're free to be a jerk by, for example, illegally poaching them in forbidden zones, attracting the attention of a corrupt police force that monitors the island. Mizobe tells me morality doesn't factor into the storytelling, so if you want a (mostly) consequence-free excuse to be a monster, go right ahead.

Regarding survival mechanics, Palpagos features a day/night cycle and changing climate, meaning you need to cope with uncomfortably hot or cold temperatures. With all these spinning plates, Pocketpair tells me the general gameplay loop looks like this: You craft vital tools, gather resources, build a base, explore some more, perhaps fight a boss along the way, and repeat. In between that, you catch Pals since they're necessary for almost every facet of play.

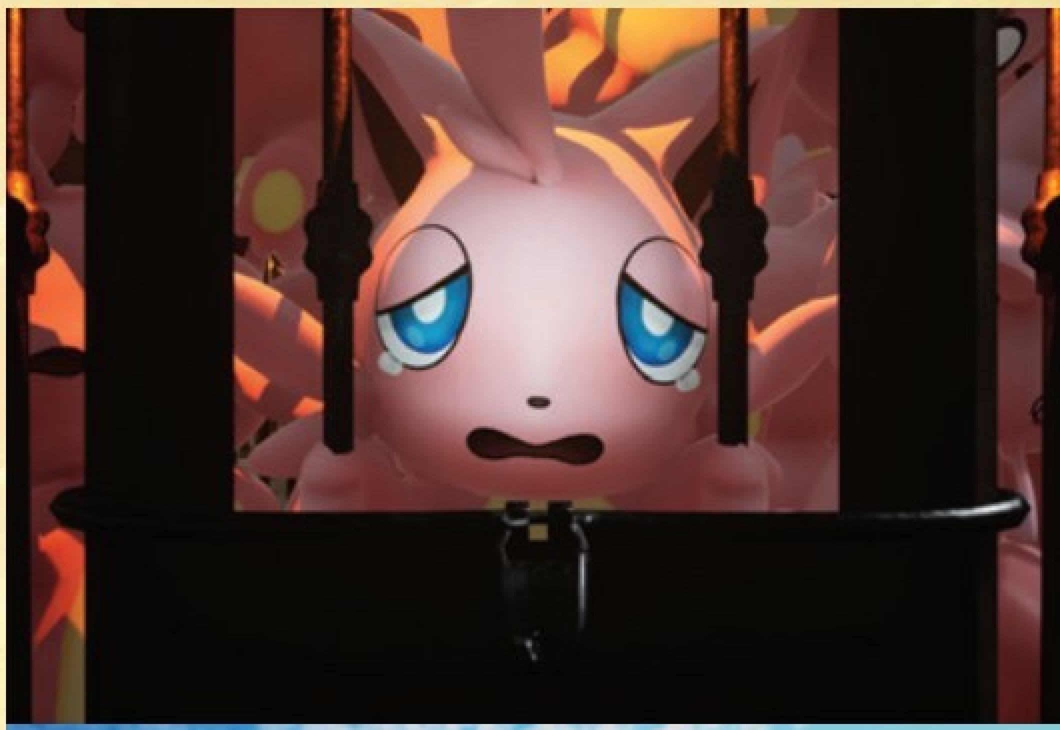
Additionally, multiplayer allows players to explore Palworld together. Up to four friends can play normally, but dedicated servers support over 20. With so much going on, Mizobe tells me feature creep has often reared its ugly head. Thus, cutting ideas to prevent Palworld from becoming bloated and unfocused has been an ongoing challenge. "At the beginning, we thought about having a huge underground world and the ability to live in outer space, but we decided to give up on these for the time being," says Mizobe.

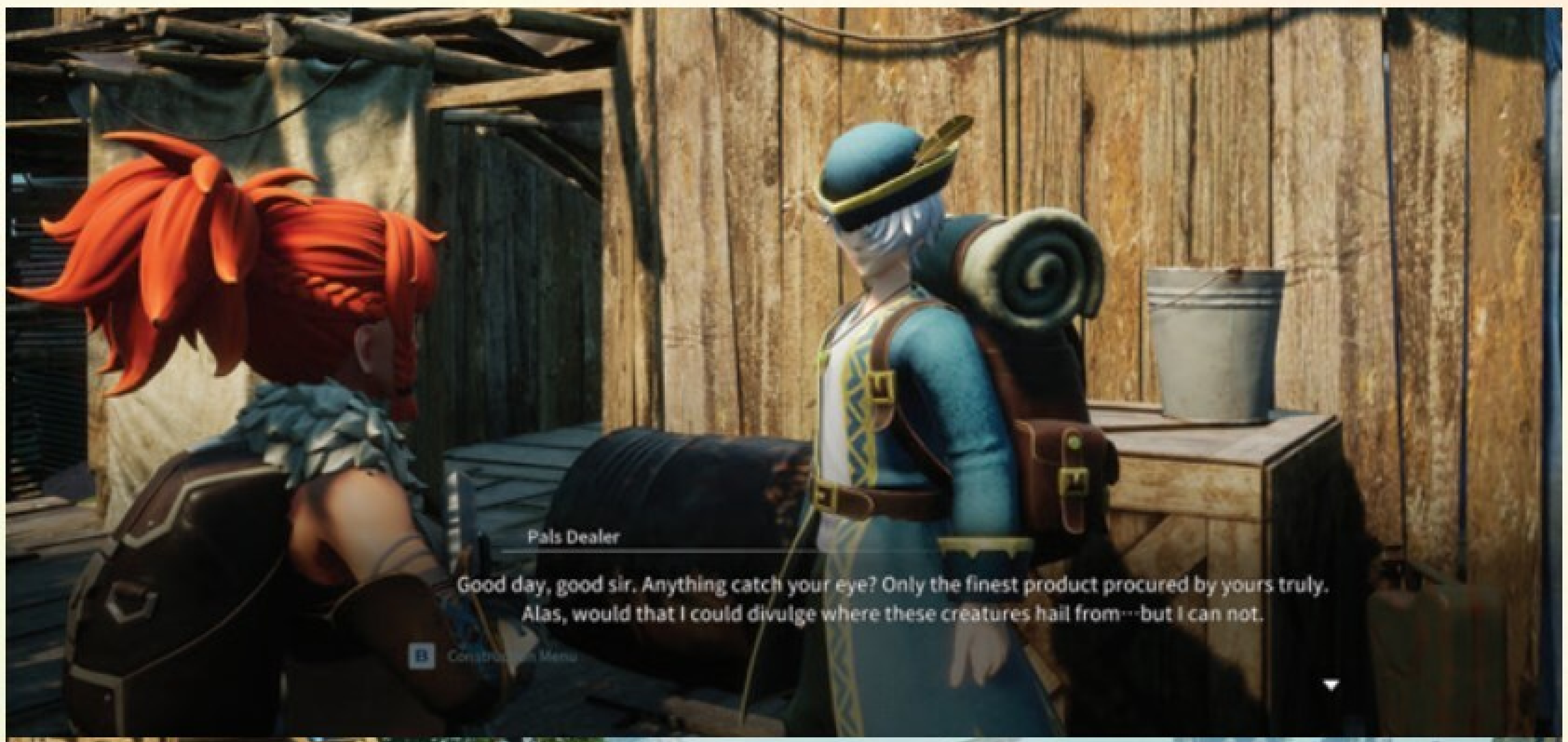
According to Mizobe, Palworld carries lessons learned from the studio's previous efforts. Mainly, simply mashing together disparate genres isn't enough and should be done carefully. Pocketpair had trouble defining the rules of Overdungeon because it was so focused on replicating the RTS elements of Clash Royale. Craftopia had so many ideas that some mechanics clashed, which the team is still correcting.

"Palworld is being made with the awareness that 'we are working through difficult game design problems in order to keep the consistency of each genre,'" Mizobe writes. "We try to not tackle too much at the same time while being focused on meeting the players' expectations. We've made a lot of mistakes along the way, but overall, we think it turned out well in the end."

We can only hope that the team continues to zero in on what makes Palworld click, even if they still have some more tough decisions to make in the long road ahead.

"We recently noticed the potential for a PvP mode in this game and are now reconsidering if we should expand on it," says Mizobe. "That has us facing a difficult challenge again. Game development is always difficult." ■





Pals Dealer

Good day, good sir. Anything catch your eye? Only the finest product procured by yours truly. Alas, would that I could divulge where these creatures hail from···but I can not.

Previews

spotlight

58 MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2 // **60** ALAN WAKE 2 // **61** CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE III // **62** WITCHFIRE
63 LITTLE NIGHTMARES III // **64** WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER // **66** THE TALOS PRINCIPLE 2
67 PRINCESS PEACH SHOWTIME // **69** SKULL AND BONES // **71** RUGRATS: ADVENTURES IN GAMELAND // **71** ULTROS

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Doubly satisfying

↘ Images
©2023 Marvel

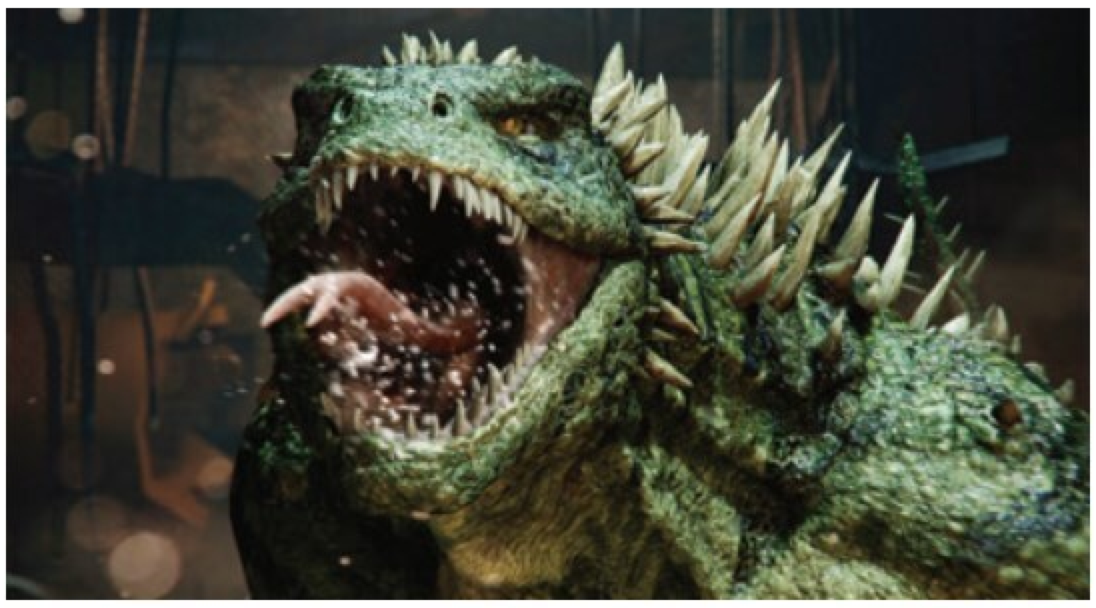
With two fantastic Spider-Man games under its belt, Marvel's Spider-Man 2 feels like the culmination of Insomniac Games' 2018 title and 2020's Miles Morales in all the best ways. I spent roughly 90 minutes swinging and gliding across Spider-Man 2's improved New York City and walked away thinking one thing: the first two games swung so that this third act could soar.

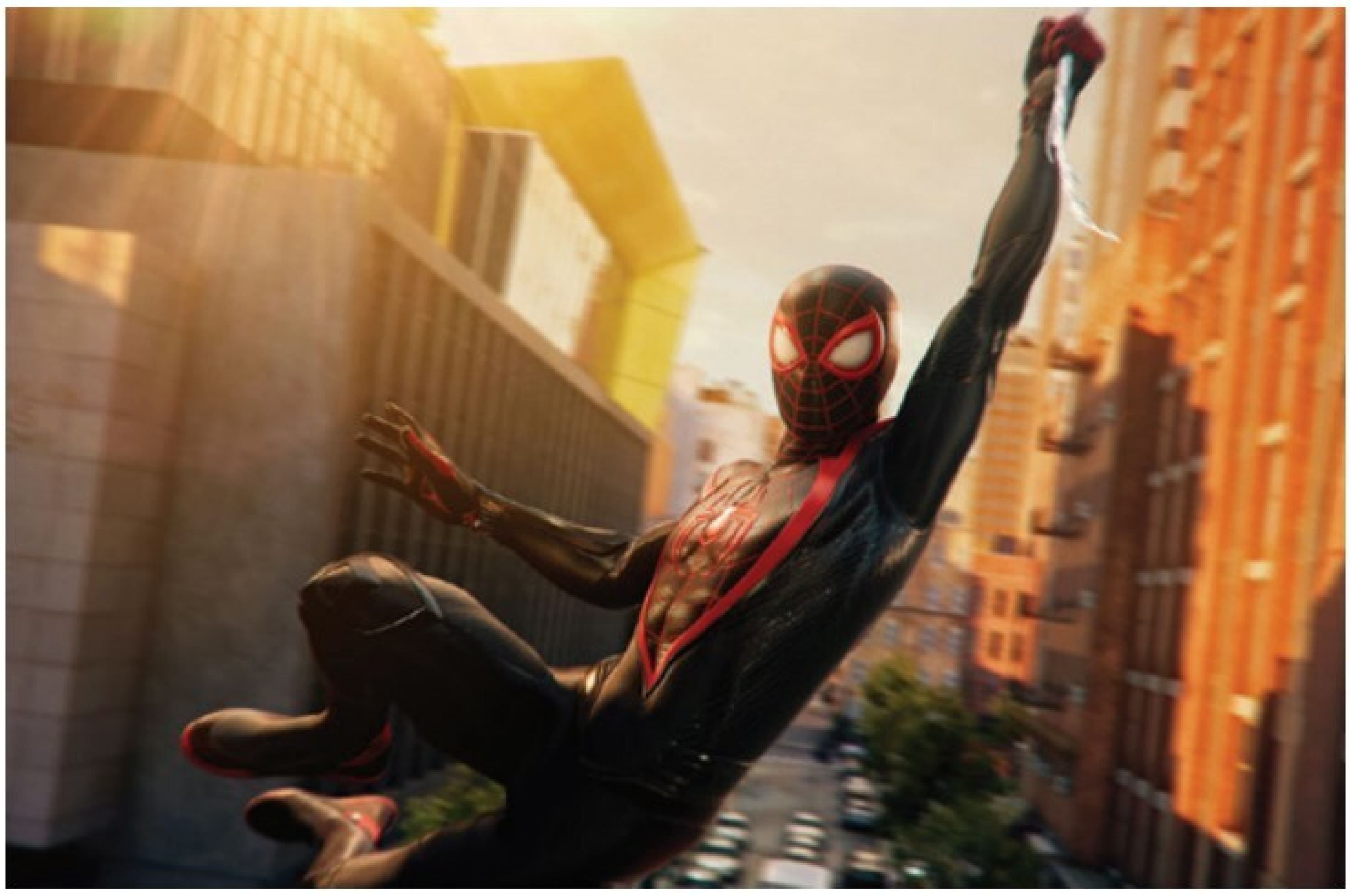
Spider-Man 2 picks up nine months after the events of Miles Morales. Peter is still coping with Aunt May's death and has since moved into her home, which players visit between missions. Mary Jane remains a constant source of companionship and encouragement, and after only appearing as a voice and a cameo in the first game, Harry Osborn has returned to the city. He's aware of Peter's superheroic moonlighting and is willing to help.

Miles Morales, meanwhile, is on the cusp of graduating high school along with his friends Ganke and Haley. Like all teens during this pivotal time, he's torn on what the next chapter of his life looks like, evidenced by his struggle to complete a school essay on the topic. The fact that he's still looking out for his community as a costumed hero only complicates matters, as does his obsession with locating Martin Li, a.k.a. Mr. Negative, the man behind his father's death.

My demo takes place a few hours into the game and gives me a meaty sample of both Spiders, some story missions, and the open world connecting it all. New York City is a larger, denser playground thanks to the additions of Brooklyn and Queens, and it's filled with activities, some specific to Peter or Miles. Players can instantly switch between either hero outside of missions, and progression is shared between the two, so neither will be left behind if you have a preference.

Combat remains an acrobatic dance of chaining attacks, flinging objects at targets, and dodging offense, but the Spiders have a new parry for added defense. Hitting L1 when yellow-tinted attacks turn red repels and stuns them, providing windows to retaliate. You can parry normal attacks, too, and it's especially useful against larger tank enemies. It took a while for me to not just rely on dodging, but parrying feels good and, most importantly, like a natural fit to the arsenal.





In addition to the gadget wheel, a second ability wheel houses Peter's symbiote powers/Iron Spider attacks and Miles' bioelectric arsenal. Thus, players have even more abilities at their disposal at any time, and I loved combining web gadgets with my other talents. The symbiote abilities feel appropriately powerful and brutal, whether it's unleashing several tendrils to slam multiple targets or turning into a living spiked ball that plows through anyone in my way. Peter can have a mix of the symbiote and Iron Spider skills, the latter of which includes an aggressive barrage of robotic leg swipes and using these artificial limbs to unleash a rising kick that knocks foes airborne before Pete finishes them with an earth-shaking ground punch. Not to be outdone, Miles' electric powers feel just as game-changing, such as an electrified leap that carries multiple targets airborne for you to juggle or a lightning blast that zaps several nearby baddies.

Web-swinging and general traversal has always been my favorite element in the past games, and Spider-Man 2's wingsuit ups the fun. Hitting the triangle button seamlessly switches to gliding between web swings, and I was surprised at how long the Spider-Men can stay airborne. I soared for what seemed like miles, even without the help of wind tunnels propelling my speed. The steering uses standard, inverted flight controls, and it feels great; it didn't take long before I was banking sharp turns around buildings with ease or nosediving under tunnels to gain momentum to shoot upwards. Gliding is especially handy for traversing city blocks with either lower buildings or none at all, where it keeps forward momentum going without interruption.

The series' enjoyable flow of movement is at its zenith in Spider-Man 2. Between web-swinging, gliding, and the ability to temporarily ski atop bodies of water, preserving momentum is easier than ever, as is recovering from a mistake. There's always a way to adjust trajectory or rebound from a blunder, whether web-zipping to a nearby perch to launch from or foot-skiing across a river you fell into before continuing swinging.

Between the strong writing and performances I witnessed, plus a bevy of new villains and secrets, Insomniac has a heck of a sequel on its hands. I can't wait to rescue New York again as my two favorite arachnid-powered do-gooders.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Insomniac Games
RELEASE October 20

ALAN WAKE 2

The power of words

I got my hands on Alan Wake 2 during a recent preview event, letting me explore two slices of the game as the troubled titular author and FBI agent Saga Anderson. Thanks to its exceptional gameplay and presentation, I'm even more excited to see how these campaigns expand and converge.

My demo begins with Saga as she investigates the small fishing village of Watery. She searches for The Clicker, the enigmatic killer and leader of a deadly cult. Investigations are Saga's forte, as I'm tasked with probing Watery's residents in search of leads. Dialogue choices steer these talks differently, with certain clues unlocking new conversations. I encounter two brothers who speak like Saga has lived in Watery for years and treat her presence as a return. Our strange chat points me toward a trailer park in search of answers.

Investigation progress is tracked in the Mind Map. Hitting the touchpad on PS5 brings up a cabin that essentially acts as a more interactive menu. You can walk over to different areas of the room to access categories such as flow charts for posting and connecting clues to various mysteries, upgrading weapons, and pursuing subject profiles, among other things. This presentation made entering Mind Map jarring at first, as it seemed like I suddenly fast-traveled to a new area rather than entering a menu. Thankfully, you can switch to a more standardized view of the Mind Map, where you'll switch tabs on a single screen if you prefer.

I then took control of Alan, trapped in the Dark Place and in search of a haunted hotel. Using his light-capturing Dark Place Lamp (DPL), I navigate this twisted version of New York City by absorbing light charges, instantly transforming areas. For example, I find a shotgun trapped behind a locked door, but capturing the light from a nearby lampost shifts to the "dark" version of this spot, where this barrier vanishes. The changes can sometimes be more subtle to the point that I was swapping between the light and dark versions several times in some spots in search of new elements. But it's a neat effect that lends itself to some engaging puzzle-solving.

I also sample Alan's other primary world-shaping ability: rewriting scenes. Visiting certain areas or learning special plot details adds them to your Mind Map, which you can then apply to areas to "rewrite" them. For example, to chase The Clicker, I needed to transform the hotel using a plot inspiration called The Devil, warping the area into the aftermath of the killer's massacre, complete with a litany of bodies and a bloodstained trail guiding me to their location. I had fun applying different inspirations to different areas and seeing how they changed, such as changing the lobby into a haunted version of itself from a ghost story.

In terms of combat, the over-the-shoulder gunplay feels good, with weapons such as my pistol and shotgun packing a satisfying punch. Of course, rendering threats vulnerable by concentrating your flashlight beam on them is the first course of action before you riddle them with bullets. Combat is also challenging; I stubbornly tackled one room filled with enemies and repeatedly failed, thanks to their large numbers and my limited ammo. Alan Wake 2 is a survival horror game, after all; it's often better to slip past foes rather than deplete resources fighting them unless you absolutely must.

This demo offered a mind-bending good time, and Alan Wake 2 feels like a substantial step up from the first game thus far. Fans may be in for quite a double feature when it arrives just before Halloween. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Epic Games **DEVELOPER** Remedy Entertainment **RELEASE** October 27

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE III

Once more with feeling, again

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III is back. Wait, no, it's a brand-new entry, not to be confused with 2011's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3. It's the first back-to-back sequel in years, as publisher Activision usually staggers Black Ops or World War II-based games like Call of Duty: Vanguard in between Modern Warfare releases.

And while I chuckle at the confusing timeline and narrative, I'd be lying if I said I didn't plan to play MWIII.

At the forefront of that excitement is the reveal that all 16 launch maps from 2009's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 have been completely remade and "modernized" for MWIII. Returning to Terminal, Rust, Highrise, Favela, and more alongside a team of five other players sounds like good fun, and I legitimately can't wait. I should hold my standards a bit higher, but honestly, these maps have me in on day one.

But without that nostalgia, the full MWIII package is still enticing. Outside of those 16 remastered maps, the game features three brand-new Battle Maps, which developer Sledgehammer Games describes as "large-scale locations where Modern Warfare III's Ground War and Invasion game modes will be fought," plus a One War map that supports the return of the War Mode that debuted in 2017's Call of Duty: WWII.

Jumping into the nitty gritty, strangely but for the better, MWIII's gameplay updates are what I'd describe as complete fixes to a lot of what was wrong with last year's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II. This includes faster aim-down-sights out of a slide, refinements to slide and reload canceling, perks available at the start of a match, base health increases, and increased time-to-kill, amongst others. Plus, an evolved Gunsmith system brings players more customization and weapon combinations alongside new and returning perks.

To wrap all of these multiplayer changes and quality-of-life updates in a neat bow, Activision Blizzard says most of your MWII "content" will carry forward. The company stops short of explaining the full extent of this, but it does say all weapons and Operator content previously unlocked will carry forward to MWIII. It's a commendable effort and one I hope the franchise continues to do if Call of Duty remains an annual release.

Elsewhere, Captain Price and Task Force 141 are back, facing off against Vladmir Makarov, who appeared at the end of MWII and throughout the original Call of Duty: Modern Warfare trilogy. Open Combat Missions are new to the campaign, built to "react and adapt to different playstyles," be it stealth or run and gun, meant to complement the more standard, cinematic levels found in every Call of Duty campaign.

The final pillar of the MWIII package is Zombies, a first for the Modern Warfare series. Black Ops team Treyarch is developing it and tells an unearthly "Dark Aether" story set in this universe with its own missions and secrets for players to discover.

MWIII isn't a drastic rework of the series, but I didn't expect it to be. I know what Call of Duty's yearly releases are at this point, and sometimes, adding some old maps I love because nostalgia is effective is all that's needed to get me playing. And I'll be playing MWIII on day one as a result.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Activision Blizzard
DEVELOPER Sledgehammer Games **RELEASE** November 10

WITCHFIRE

Brutal flow

I've enthusiastically followed the development of Witchfire for many years. The gothic fantasy world features tightly paced FPS gunplay inspired by the likes of Destiny; it's a formula that holds a lot of appeal. With an early access version of the game now available, a final version isn't yet ready for full review, but is it already worth a purchase? The answer has a lot to do with your patience and tenacity in the face of a brutal difficulty curve.

Early communication suggested Witchfire was targeting high challenge for its roguelike approach to FPS, but I think the intensity of the trial was undersold. Playing as an immortal puppet to a militant church, the Preyer flings himself repeatedly at the forces of a powerful necromantic witch. Large open biomes are consistent in geography, but each new run sees enemy configurations shuffle. And while their locations might shift, one thing doesn't change – the overwhelming number of enemies and how easily they can send you packing.

My early hours of experimentation were a combination of excitement and frustration. Prior to any leveling, I found it hard to survive even the first few confrontations I encountered. Enemies are tenacious and aggressive, and the early and non-upgraded hand cannon you carry seems woefully inadequate to hold back the tide. Without spells, additional weapons, upgraded health, or other stats, it was difficult to make progress.

Repeated retries gradually began to see gains, where I acquired enough witchfire to escape through a portal and level up. But the game steadfastly refuses to let you get ahead; each time you level, the Witch adds new enemies, traps, or other complexities to the environments. Health elixirs help a bit with survivability, but even those require you farm for herbs while in the midst of combat and exploration, and the needed ingredients seem incredibly rare and hard to find. So, even as I grew in strength, I eventually had no health refills to help keep me alive. Random calamity events also began to rise in frequency, layering additional waves of foes on top of standard placements.

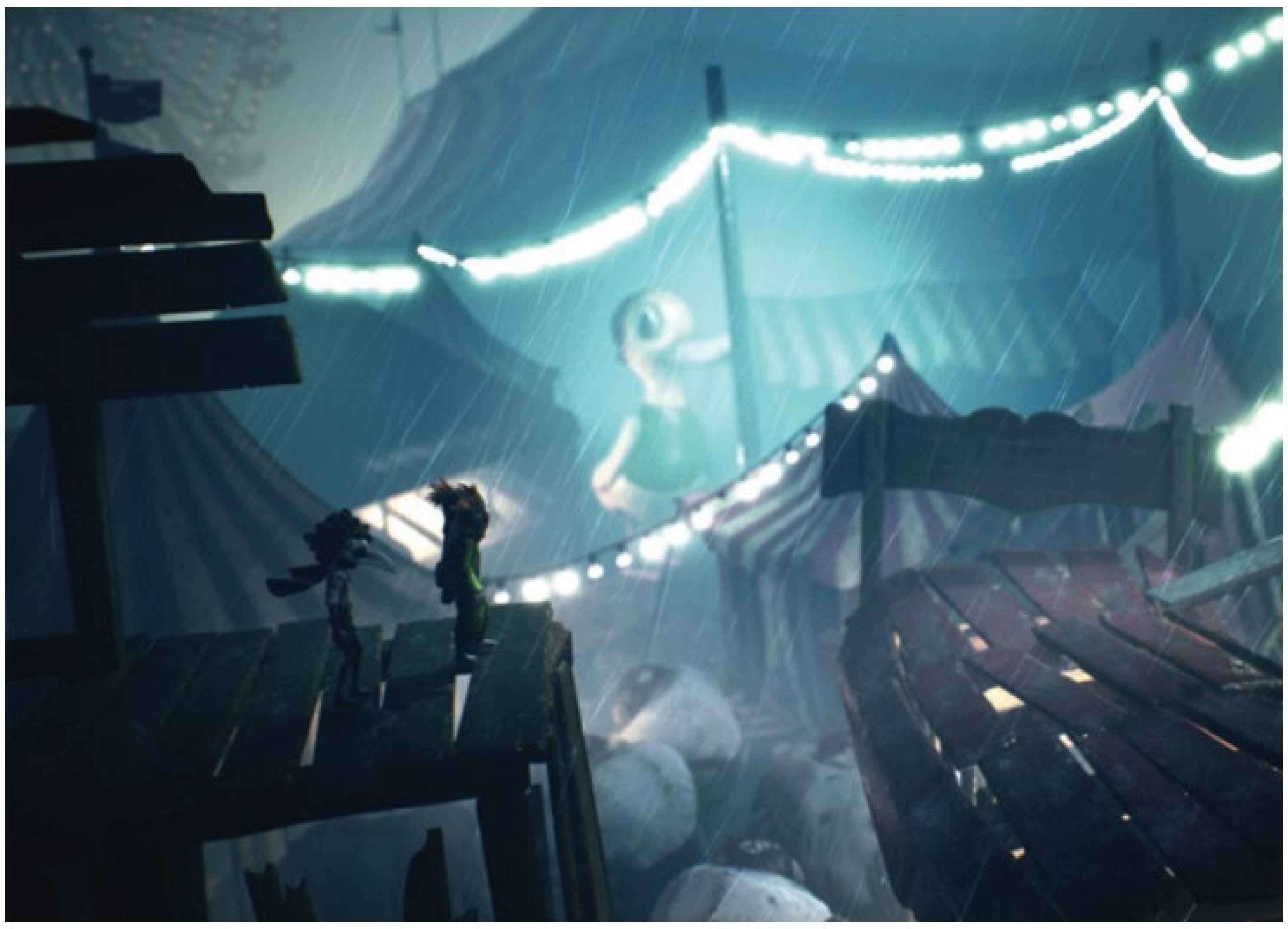
In short, I've rarely felt so overwhelmed by a game's early hours. Even as a seasoned FPS player, I often found progress too slow and tedious. However, stacked against that glacial progression pacing is a gorgeous game world and genuinely thrilling movement and gunplay. With time, I began to grasp the high-risk approach the game encourages. Close-range aggressive play is highly rewarded through stamina regeneration and high damage, leading to a flow playstyle that takes out enemies quickly but constantly puts you at increased risk for death and an abrupt end to the run. Character and equipment improvement is also fun, as the addition of new weapons, magic items, and spells have the potential to be transformative in battle.

The early access version of Witchfire isn't yet a complete game, and there's no doubt the coming months will likely see a wealth of updates to difficulty, progression, and pacing. For my part, I'm thoroughly engaged by the world and feel of gameplay, but I'd like more control over my own character's equipment development and run planning. As it is, random spikes in difficulty and vastly divergent character powers in a given run make it hard to plan or implement a strategy to advance. Nonetheless, developer The Astronauts has crafted a fascinating adventure here with many interlocking systems to discover; fantasy and FPS fans who don't mind a tough challenge should consider a trip into this dark and dangerous world. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER The Astronauts
DEVELOPER The Astronauts **RELEASE** TBA

LITTLE NIGHTMARES III

On the road to Nowhere



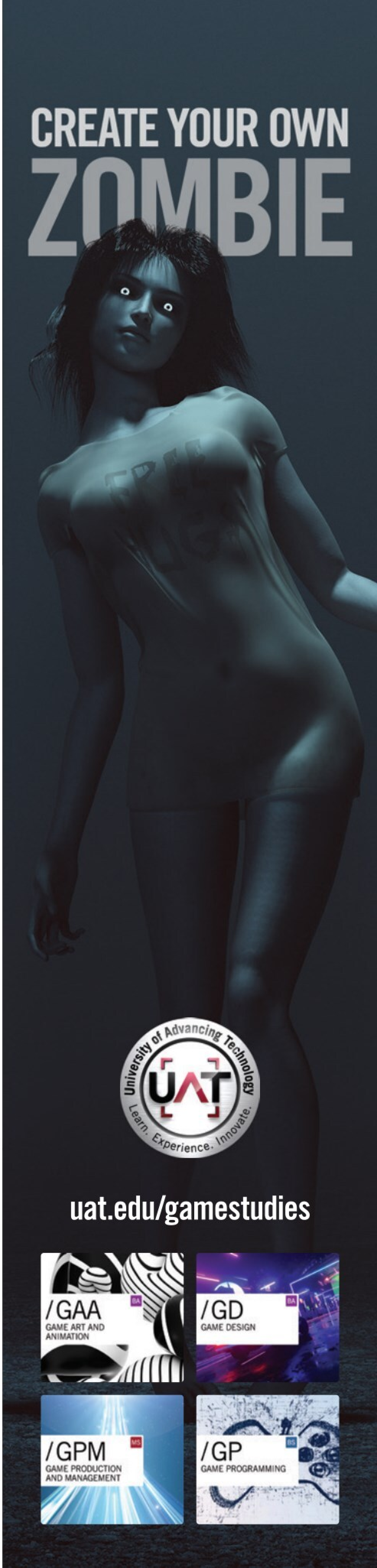
The fact that Little Nightmares is now a franchise is a surprise. The first game was announced as Hunger and wasn't released until four years later with its arguably more accurate title, Little Nightmares. Despite being a completely original game with a small scope, it was a big creepy hit and received a mobile game follow-up and comic book prologue ahead of its sequel. There is something undeniable and inviting about the art style and vague story of children trying to survive in this hellish world.

The third mainline entry continues with the core premise of children in a dangerous world, but there are some changes. Six, the protagonist in the yellow raincoat of the first game and the secondary protagonist in the sequel, so far, does not appear to be in the game. Part three is also the first time Little Nightmares will have online co-op (no couch co-op, unfortunately). Low and Alone are new characters trying to escape The Nowhere.

The most surprising change, however, is that Tarsier, the developer of the first two games, is not working on this entry. Instead, Supermassive Games, the studio behind Until Dawn and The Quarry, is developing Little Nightmares III. It may seem like an odd fit considering its recent games, but Supermassive worked on the enhanced edition of Little Nightmares II, as well as several LittleBigPlanet projects.

After enjoying the first two games, I am excited that Little Nightmares has more stories to tell. It's an intriguing world that, even after two games and various spinoffs, remains mostly mysterious. I am tentative about a new developer working on the third entry, but I am excited about where the series goes next. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games **RELEASE** 2024


CREATE YOUR OWN
ZOMBIE
University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.
uat.edu/gamestudies
/GAA
GAME ART AND ANIMATION
BA
/GD
GAME DESIGN
BA
/GPM
GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT
MS
/GP
GAME PROGRAMMING
BS

WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER

Tools of the traders

The universe of Warhammer 40,000 is known to be grim, harsh, and uncompromising. Endless war ravages countless planets, and the humans of the world have no choice but to conform and serve the Imperium. It's a compelling world for most forms of storytelling, but when you're trying to make a CRPG with an emphasis on player freedom, this rigid government structure poses a bit of a challenge. Luckily, developer Owlcat Games has found a niche that avoids these restrictions – the titular rogue traders.

Set in the largely uncharted Koronus Expanse, players in Rogue Trader have a lot more freedom than characters in the rest of the Warhammer universe, and can even forge alliances that would otherwise be impossible. For example, when creative director Alexander Mishuilin plays a live demo for me, his party includes a character named Marazhai, a member of the Drukhari, a faction known for their brutality and hatred towards humans. At a certain point in the story, the player can choose to kill or recruit him; Mishulin takes it one step further and builds an entire party around him. I appreciate that even from the very start of our demo, it's clear player choice substantially impacts how the game is played.

The part of the game I'm shown is estimated to be 80 hours into the 100-hour campaign, so every character has a wide range of combat abilities. The player character has come to investigate a planet when they see some glowing green buildings – easily identifiable as the architecture of Necrons, a faction of humanoid robots. As soon as the rogue Trader and his party get close, they're pulled into combat, and Necrons use beacons to teleport reinforcements in.

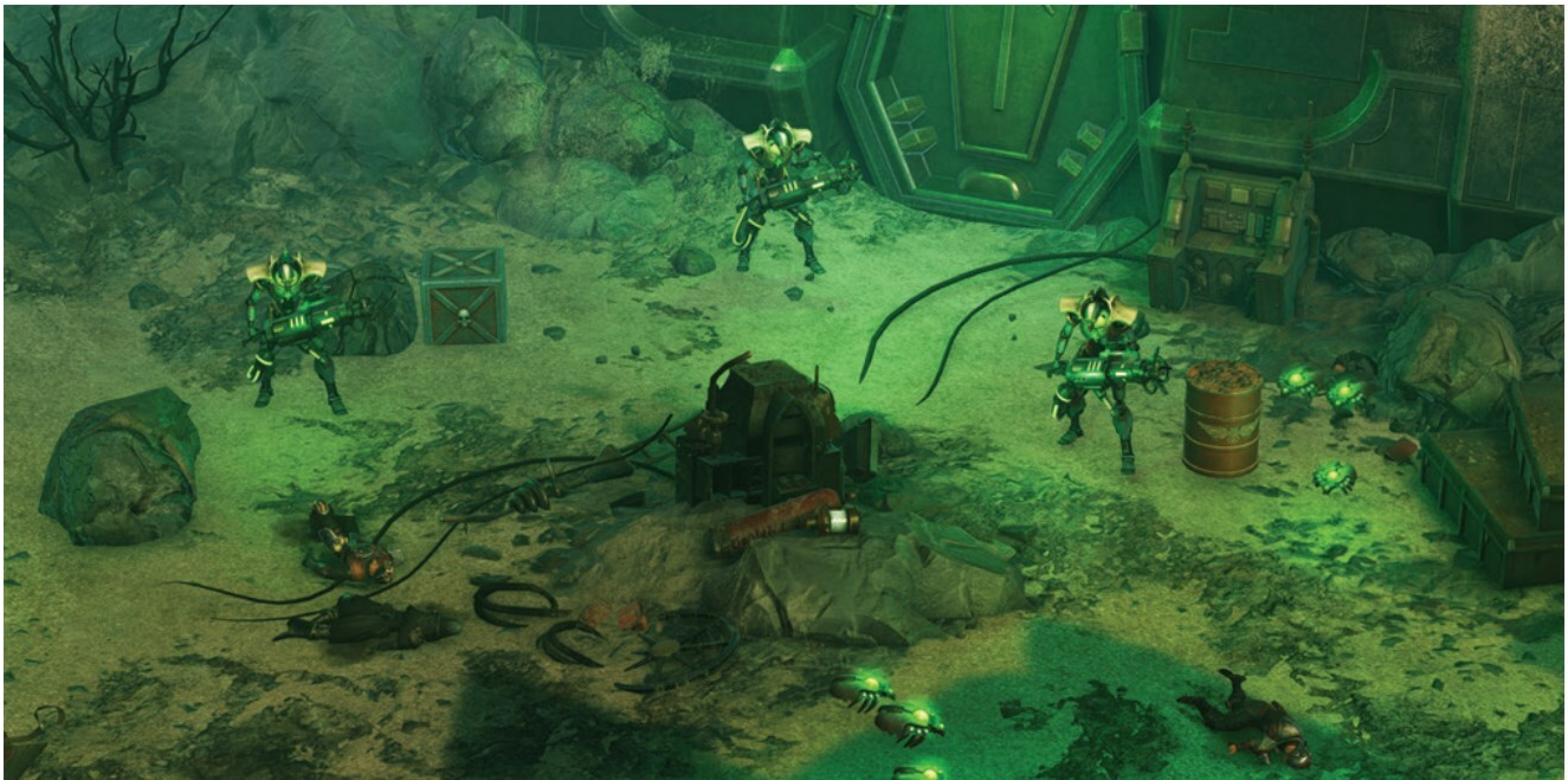
Mishulin pans the camera around the battlefield, assessing his surroundings before positioning his units to start the battle. The first thing he has to do is destroy the glowing matrix beacons on either edge of the battlefield since they teleported in the first wave of Necron soldiers. "I don't know what they will be bringing in next," Mishulin says. He pauses for a minute. "Honestly speaking," he laughs, "I do know, and I don't like it." He must also destroy the Necron Immortal, an intimidating miniboss in the center of the arena wielding a massive Tesla Carbine that threatens to take out Mishulin's party members in a single hit.

Combat in Rogue Trader takes place in the overworld, which exists on a grid. Characters have movement and action points that determine their decisions throughout the course of battle, and there's an emphasis on hiding characters behind cover to increase their defense.

Mishulin's strategy is completely built around Marazhai; he sends in a tank named Abelard to take a huge hit from the immortal, then sends the Drukhari assassin on a melee rampage. Jae is another key MVP, using her support abilities to give Marazhai extra turns, which he can extend even further thanks to his abilities. As the battle goes on, his damage gets higher and higher; while the first few enemies take quite a few hits, the last Necron soldiers are easily eliminated. And while Marazhai takes out the Immortal, the other characters eliminate the beacons, ensuring the first wave of enemies is also the last.

Half an hour later, the battle is done, and I'm sold on the combat system. Between the exciting character synergies on the battlefield and the promise of player impact on the world around you, I'm excited to dive into Rogue Trader this December. **BY CHARLES HARTE.**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 to 3-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive
DEVELOPER Focus Entertainment **RELEASE** 2023



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

Remember the Titus

The original Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine was straightforward in its simplicity, and its reception was generally positive as a result. Twelve years later, the sequel is right around the corner, and from my time going hands-on, it seems just as focused on that simple you-versus-waves shooter gameplay. If you're here for more Space Marine, it delivers; if you're here for inventive gameplay, you'll probably want to look elsewhere.

I play the second mission in the campaign, which takes place on Kadaku, a planet overrun by an insect-like alien race called Tyranids. The human forces are in dire need of assistance. Luckily, Titus and his group of Space Marines, genetically modified super soldiers, have arrived to turn the tide. The tone in dialogue and mission structure is typical of a war campaign, but the Tyranids make the tone feel closer to a zombie game. They show up in massive hordes, and while some have ranged attacks, they mostly rush forward as a crowd to overwhelm the humans with their scythe-like arms.

At the end of the last game, Titus was captured and questioned by the Inquisition, tragically accused of heresy after his quest to assist humanity. Ultimately, he is now allowed to serve on the Space Marines again, but he's been demoted from captain to lieutenant. That said, the change hasn't seemed to affect gameplay much. In this sequence, Titus is still the commanding officer, leading two other Space Marines into the heat of battle. The difference is seen in his dialogue with the rookies in his party. They're unaware of his true identity but can tell he's got decades of hardened experience.

The demo has no shortage of combat. The series is known for its mixture of gunplay and melee combat, and it feels natural to switch between the two. The weapons are surprisingly plain, which I found refreshing. There are no stats, no attachments, and no rarity scores – the guns are just guns, and you can grab them off the ground and keep whichever feels best. I stuck with an auto bolt rifle for crowds, a heavy bolt pistol to pick off individual foes, and a chainsword for when things got into melee range.

My favorite mechanic happens when you do a perfect dodge; after evading at the last second, I tap the shoot button to stun an enemy and open it up for a slow-mo instant kill. It's satisfying every time, especially in a large crowd. Other than that, combat is about what you'd expect from a third-person shooter. It feels comfortable and familiar to people who want more of the original game, but there isn't much to write home about for gamers seeking something new.

Titus is joined by two Space Marines named Gadriel and Chairon who assist in combat. The help from A.I. companions is nice, but I'm confident the campaign would be much more enjoyable when played co-op, which I didn't have the chance to try out in this preview. That's doubly true because each character has different combat abilities, and other players would be able to coordinate their use more effectively.

Visually, the game consistently impresses. The jungle area is lush and varied. The size of military bases and ships in the distance makes the conflict feel like it's operating at an impressively large scale. And the way enemies pour out into open spaces is mesmerizing and intimidating, and I feel formidable when I can keep them at bay.

Space Marine 2 is not reinventing the wheel. Its combat didn't blow me away and I didn't get a good enough glimpse at the story to draw me in narratively. Unless there are some surprises later in the game, it feels much as I expected it would, but for people hungry for classic third-person shooters from the 2000s, that's a good thing. For better and potentially worse, it's more of the same.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 to 3-Player Action
PUBLISHER Saber Interactive
DEVELOPER Focus Entertainment
RELEASE 2023

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE 2

Rendezvous with robots

Developer Croteam made a name for itself with Serious Sam, a bombastic first-person shooter about shooting thousands of bullets at hundreds of enemies. Serious Sam's narrative, surprisingly, also deals with the long-term fate of humanity, but it was still a surprise when the studio delivered The Talos Principle in 2014, a thoughtful puzzle game that imagines a future where humanity disappeared a long time ago.

The first game puts a robot controlled by the player through a series of first-person puzzles involving light redirection and other interesting mechanics. The story left many players with long-term musings about the nature of intelligence, and the sequel picks up where the first left it. A millennia has passed, and the player is the 1000th robot born into this new robot society. You are celebrated as a cultural milestone, but you're unsure how you fit in. During the celebration of your birth, a projection appears, calling itself Prometheus, and it invites you to an island. But before it can finish speaking, a strange technology seems to overtake the hologram, leaving every robot in a state of confusion.

Talos Principle 2 picks up in earnest from that point in New Jerusalem, the city the robots have created. The young city is experiencing growing pains as its citizens have political arguments about which direction this new society should go. New Jerusalem will be a location you can explore with robots you can meet. There is even a social media system that gives you a sense of the general tone of the world.

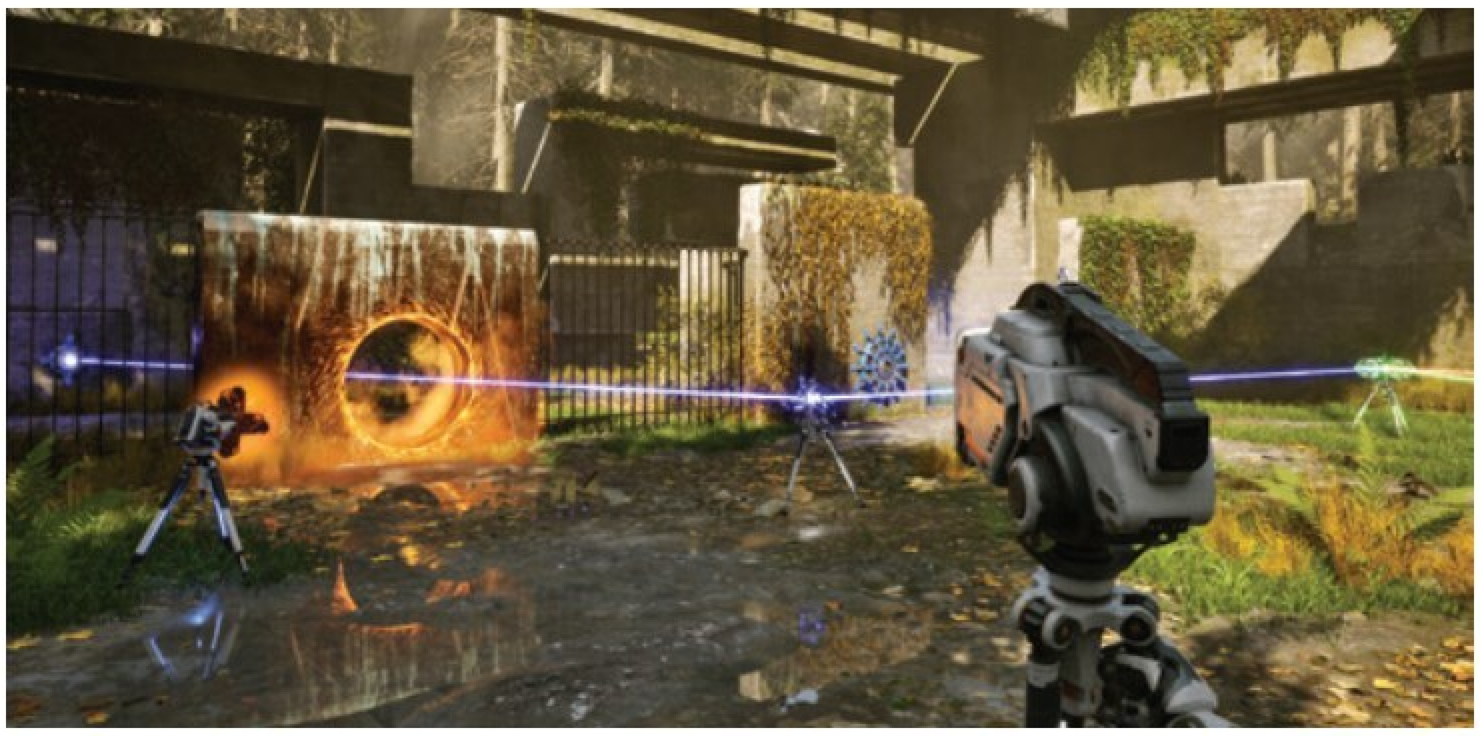
The actual gameplay, however, is puzzle solving, which involves a trip to the island referenced by Prometheus. According to Croteam, the robots of this world were more or less born from a series of puzzles, so it is a core part of their culture. It's a process they are familiar with, but it doesn't change the fact that they are encountering strange technology and new ideas as this new island is explored.

Early puzzles will be familiar to players of the first game and involve connecting colored lasers, but Croteam also showed some new puzzle mechanics. The drill devices lets you create holes through certain solid walls. You can't step through the holes, but you can reach through them. There is also a new type of gravity wall that you can walk vertically, or even upside down from in some cases. There is also a new system that will allow you to skip certain puzzles if you can't wrap your head around them.

Croteam used an unexpected reference point for the game by citing the 1996 FMV video game adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's 1973 novel, *Rendezvous with Rama*. In the book and game, an alien ship appears near Earth, and a group of astronauts intercept it to figure out what it is and where it is from. Croteam says it wants Talos Principle 2 to offer as enticing a mystery as that book did but for its puzzles not to be as frustrating as they were in the video game adaptation.

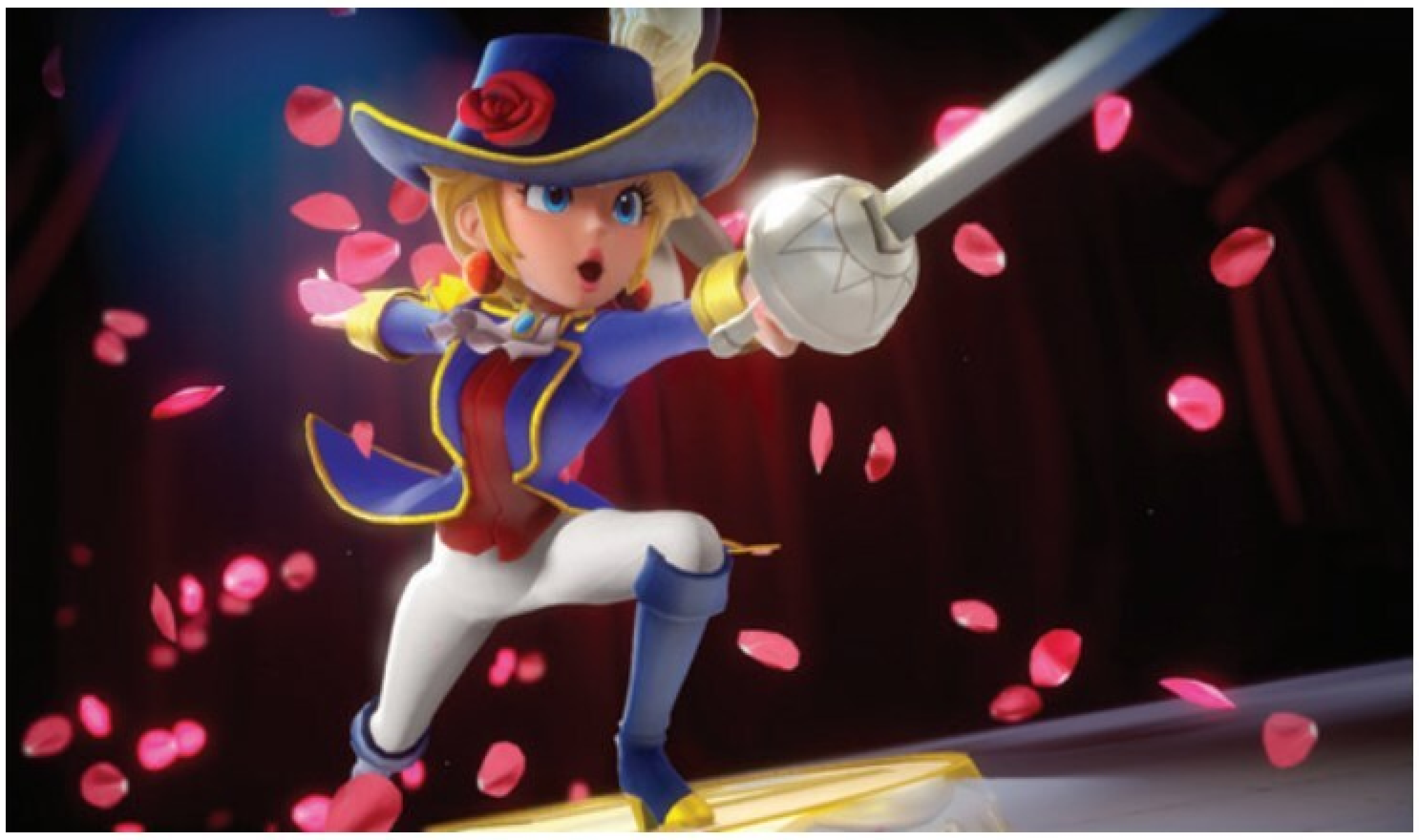
If you haven't played the first game, Croteam is confident you will still be able to appreciate the narrative and the puzzles. The robot you are playing is entering the world without any knowledge of the first game, and there are 1,000 years of societal growth that have happened since. So, thankfully, there is a big narrative gap to fill in that does not rely on previous knowledge. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Croteam **RELEASE** November 2



PRINCESS PEACH SHOWTIME

Back in the spotlight

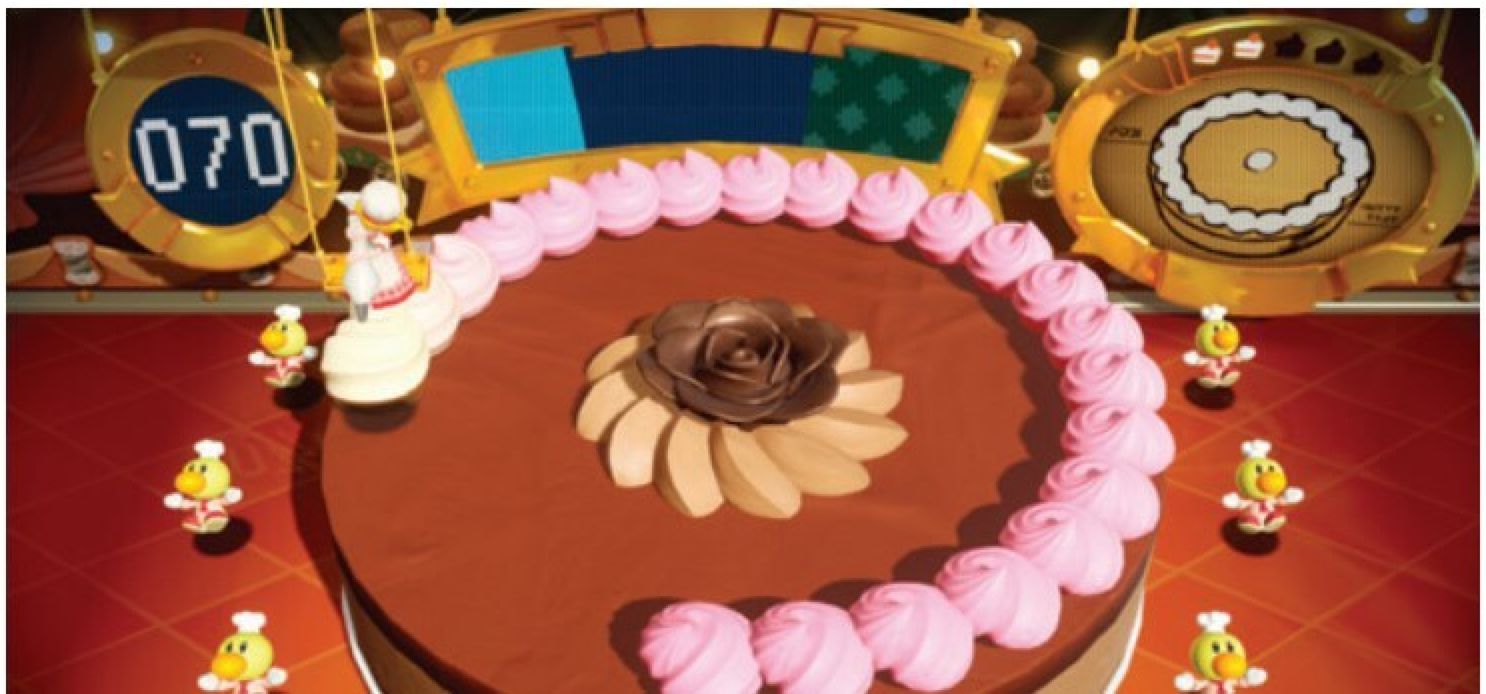


Announced without a name and the promise of additional details in the future, the Princess Peach game now has an official title, and we have an idea of how it plays. The Sparkle Theater has been taken over by a new Mario universe antagonist, The Wicked Grape and the Sour Bunch. The game plays across a series of stages (a potential callback to Super Mario Bros. 3), and it's up to Princess Peach to defeat them without even a passing reference to any plumbers – at least not that we've seen so far. However, she has a ribbon friend named Stella, who lends her some powers.

Peach can change her abilities by donning various outfits to defeat The Wicked Grape and her cohort. We saw Peach using her new friend Stella to transform enemies and small elements of the stage, but for bigger obstacles, like infectious and overgrown purple vines, Peach must transform. For the vines, she changes into Swordfighter Peach, which lets her slash the vines with a sword. We've also seen Detective Peach track down clues, Pâtissier Peach performing a cake-making minigame, and Kung Fu Peach fighting enemies and bosses and performing platforming challenges.

Peach has only received two starring roles in video games. Of course, we all remember Princess Toadstool's Castle Run on the Nelsonic Game Watch in 1990. In 2005, Super Princess Peach was released for DS. The Princess, whose fandom has only grown after her characterization in *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, is overdue for another stab at her own game. Especially one that doesn't rely on wild emotional swings as a core mechanic. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE March 22



PAYDAY 3
AVAILABLE NOW AT
GameStop
PS5
XBOX SERIES X
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
STARBREEZE
ENTERTAINMENT

EA SPORTS UFC 5

Championship rounds

Ever since the first entry in EA Sports' licensed UFC franchise delivered a solid, but barebones experience, each subsequent entry has iterated in meaningful ways. Typically releasing at a two-year cadence, the extra development time has given EA Vancouver the opportunity to implement meaningful evolutions entry over entry. With EA Sports UFC 5, the development team took three years between entries, and after seeing the game in action, the benefits are apparent.

UFC 5 brings EA's in-house Frostbite Engine into the cage for the first time in series history. The developer has seen the bungled transitions other sports franchises have made when moving to another engine, with glitches and unnatural animations plaguing some of them, but the UFC team has the advantage of not being released on an annualized basis.

This means highly detailed character models, a new level of lighting and shading, improved rendering quality, and several brand-new presentational elements involving the environments and visual effects. Seeing the side-by-sides of the character models from EA Sports UFC 4 and UFC 5 hammers home just how much better the fighters look in this upcoming version. New skin and eye shading, facial animation and body technology, and strand-based hair make the fighters look much more representative of their real-world counterparts.

EA Vancouver is also leaning hard into the violence MMA is known for. UFC 5 adds the most authentic damage to date, including cuts, bruising, and swelling that accumulate in real time over the course of a fight. The damage is designed to be true-to-life, with realistic details and, as the development team calls it, "unedited authenticity." Fighters possess eight regions for accrued damage, each with multiple levels of progression. When you combine all these regions and stages of damage, fighters can have 64,000 different damage combinations.

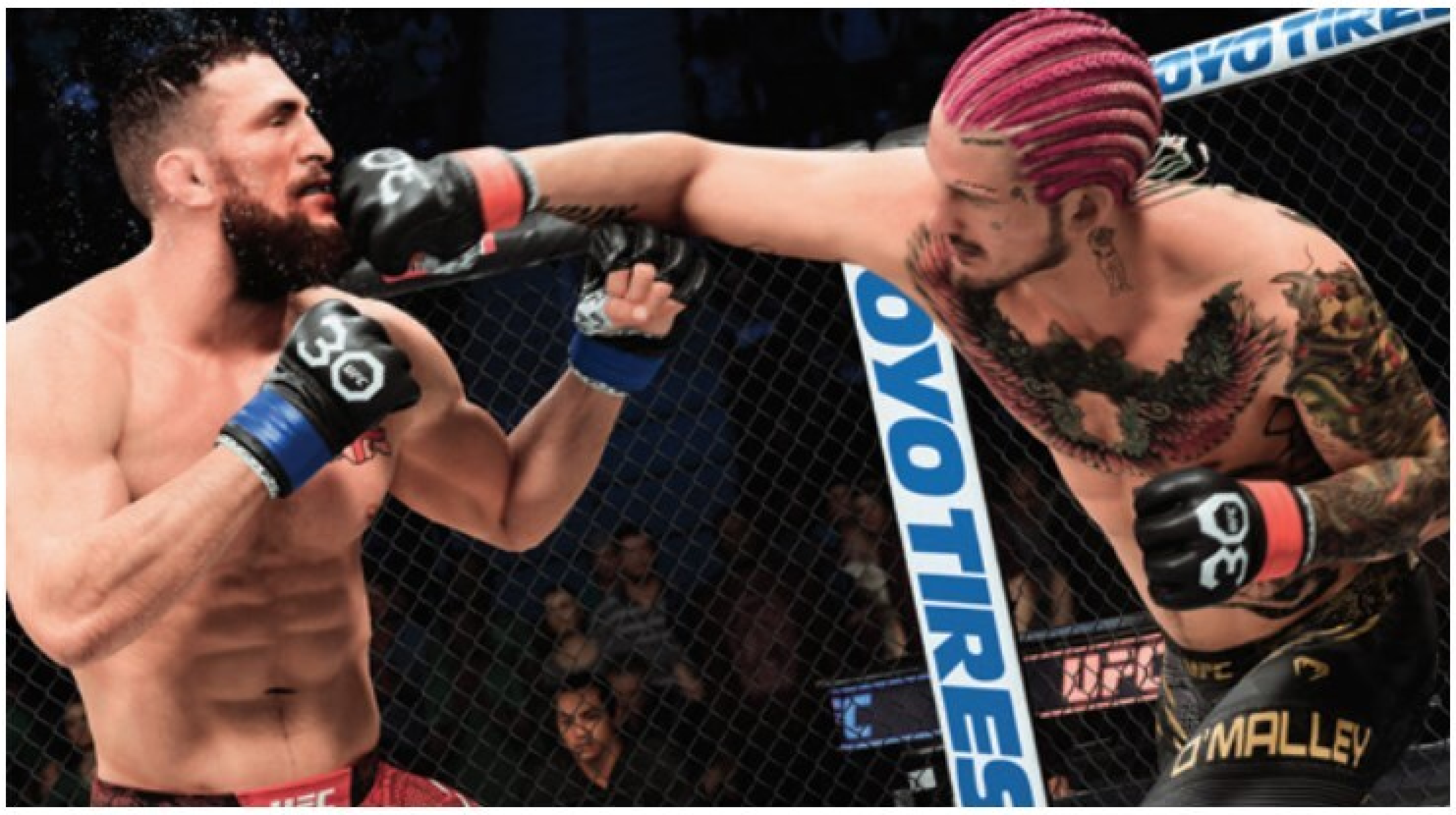
And it's not all just for show, as damage sustained has real impact on the fighter's performance. For example, a broken nose leads to slower stamina recovery, while a cut by the eye leads to impaired vision and more vulnerability on the affected side. If you take too much damage, the referee might call a stop to the action to have a doctor look at the affected areas. If the doctor deems the damage too substantial, they might call a stop to the action. As a result, UFC 5 is the first entry in the series to receive a Mature ESRB rating.

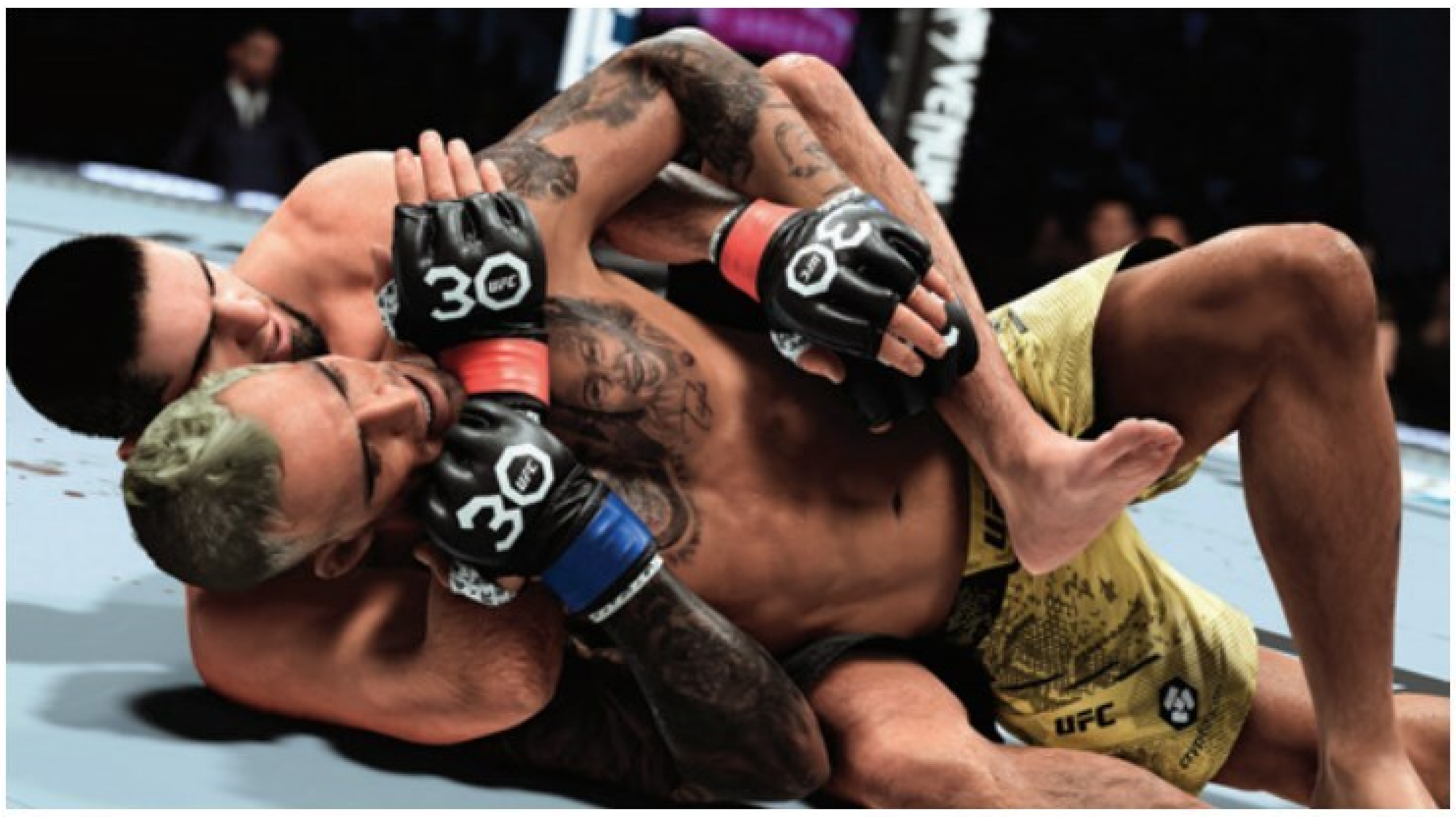
One of the biggest sticking points with fans through the first four entries is how grappling exchanges play out. While UFC 4 mitigated some of the criticism by introducing a Grapple Assist system, the default grappling system in UFC 5 is now transition-based for faster, more seamless submissions. Gone are the U.I.-heavy minigames that block out much of the screen; now, the grappling system focuses on continued immersion within the context of the fight.

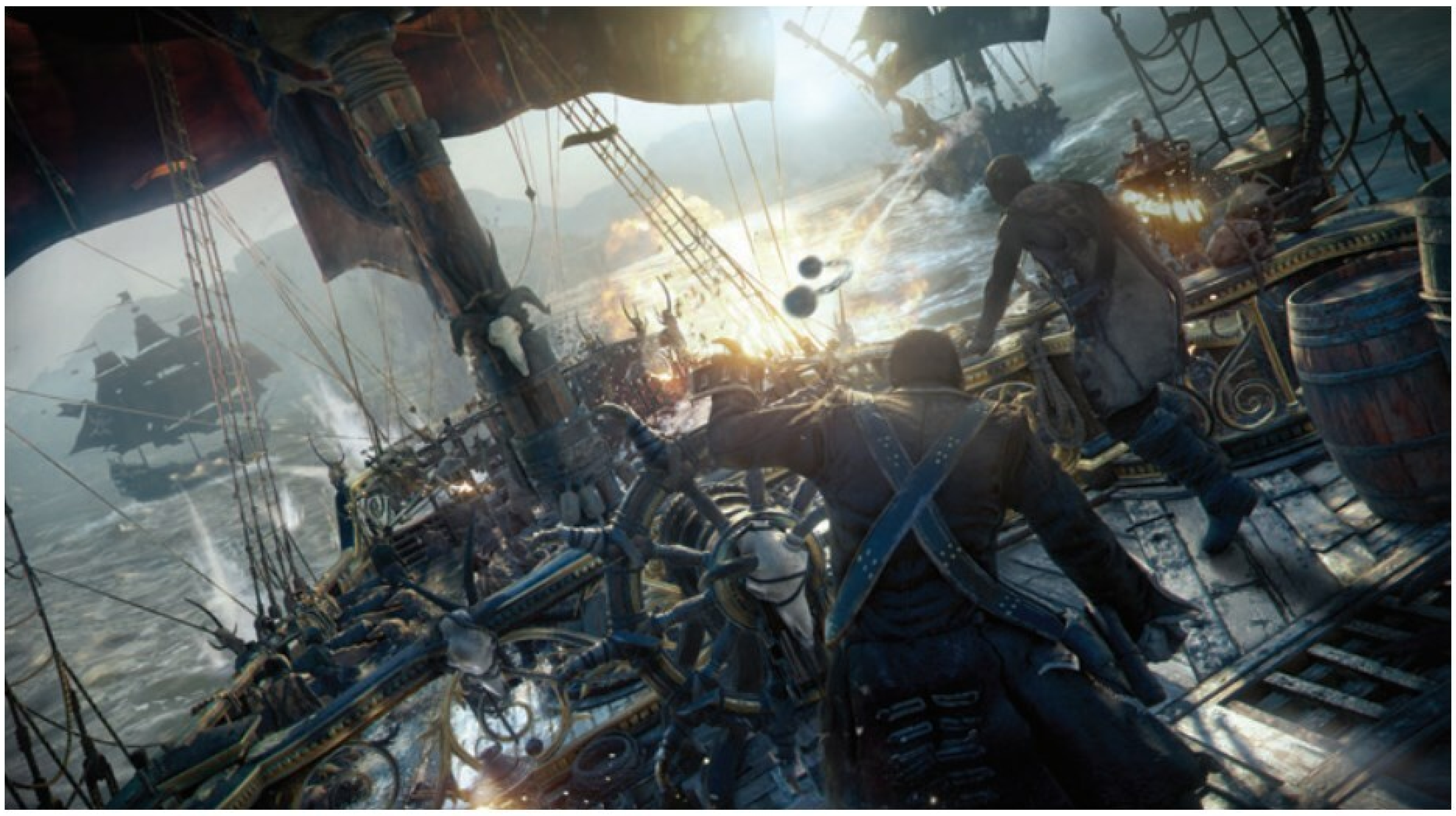
Outside of the Octagon, players can immerse themselves in a more cinematic Career experience, which features the return of Coach Davis from UFC 4. This time, he plays a bigger role in the Mature-rated story; in one of the scenes, I see him delivering a pep talk to a created fighter ahead of a big fight. There's also an Online Career where your created fighter can take on other created fighters from around the globe.

Though sports games are often criticized for their iterative approaches necessitated by annualized release schedules, the UFC 5 team thankfully doesn't have to worry about that, and if everything it showed and talked to me about plays as well as it looks, I have high hopes for this next evolution of the franchise. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Vancouver **RELEASE** October 27







SKULL AND BONES

A pirate ship's life for me

Ubisoft announced Skull and Bones way back during E3 2017. Looking back, I'm sure developer Ubisoft Singapore would agree the announcement was premature. After various delays, we're still awaiting the final release due out sometime before March of next year. However, I finally got to go hands-on with the game during a recent closed beta, and to my surprise, I had a good time.

Skull and Bones is a pirate game where you mostly play as one of various ships. I'm still frustrated it's not Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag sans Assassin's Creed, but after a few hours, I found myself enjoying what this game offers.

I begin aboard a ship fit for a pirate king, using cannons on all sides of my ship to take out various members of the navy armada before me. I do so quickly, using third-person aim-down-cannon-sights to target explosive points on surrounding vessels. But it's not enough, as half a dozen enemies encircle me and promptly lay waste to my crew. After a brief cutscene, I'm peering into a puddle of water on a piece of wood to customize my character in the reflection.

I'm disappointed by Skull and Bones' character creation, as it's just a close-up of my pirate's face, which makes picking full-body tattoos and more moot. There is also only a handful of template faces. I do my best to create Elizabeth Swann from Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, and even getting within spitting distance of her look is tough with how shallow the character customization is. But alas, with my pirate created, I begin my journey on a small dhow ship.

After a handful of tutorial missions, I make it to St. Anne, a makeshift pirate paradise of sorts, to speak to Captain John Scurlock and prove I'm worth becoming a captain in his armada. The closed beta focuses on this narrative point, and it's admittedly more story than I anticipated from a game where you spend most of your time behind a ship's wheel. It's not the most engaging story, even amongst video game piracy, but it's enough to keep the quests coming.

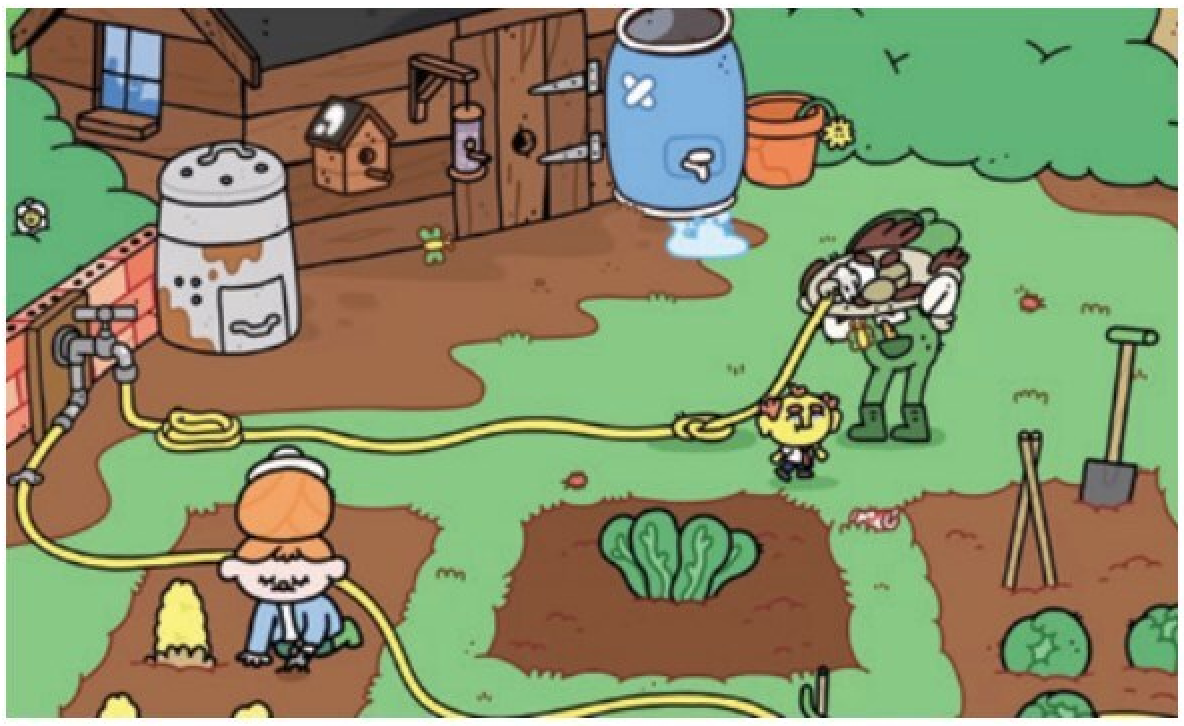
The quests almost always take me out to sea unless I'm tasked with speaking to a local blacksmith or clothier to learn more about Skull and Bones' on-land systems. The latter leaves me desperately wanting more – it's tough to live a pirate fantasy when I feel more like a ship than its captain – but the on-sea gameplay is the highlight. It's a gorgeous game, and the Golden Age of piracy in the Indian Ocean has been brought to life well. More importantly, controlling a ship to act as a menace on the ocean is fun.

Maneuvering ships is fast and easy, and it captures the more cinematic aspect of the sea without any of the struggle I imagine is required to legitimately navigate an ocean. This team could have made this a Forza Motorsport for ships but instead opted for a Need for Speed approach. It's fast, arcade-y, and easy, which is great because a lot of your nautical focus will be targeting enemies, which you must do while also steering the ship.

Firing various cannons feels like a third-person shooter and I enjoy how easy it is to hit my mark. I feel destructive, and some fantasy fudging prevents what I imagine is a sticky and slow effort in the real world from being just that. The result is a fast-paced arcade experience that makes me feel powerful. Still, while the sea legs of Skull and Bones are delivering so far, I'm not convinced what I can do on land is enough to complete the full pirate fantasy package. But this beta was just hours of what I imagine is a game consisting of at least a couple dozen. I hope the final game has the gunpowder needed to ignite the rest of this experience.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Luna • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (20-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Singapore **RELEASE** TBD



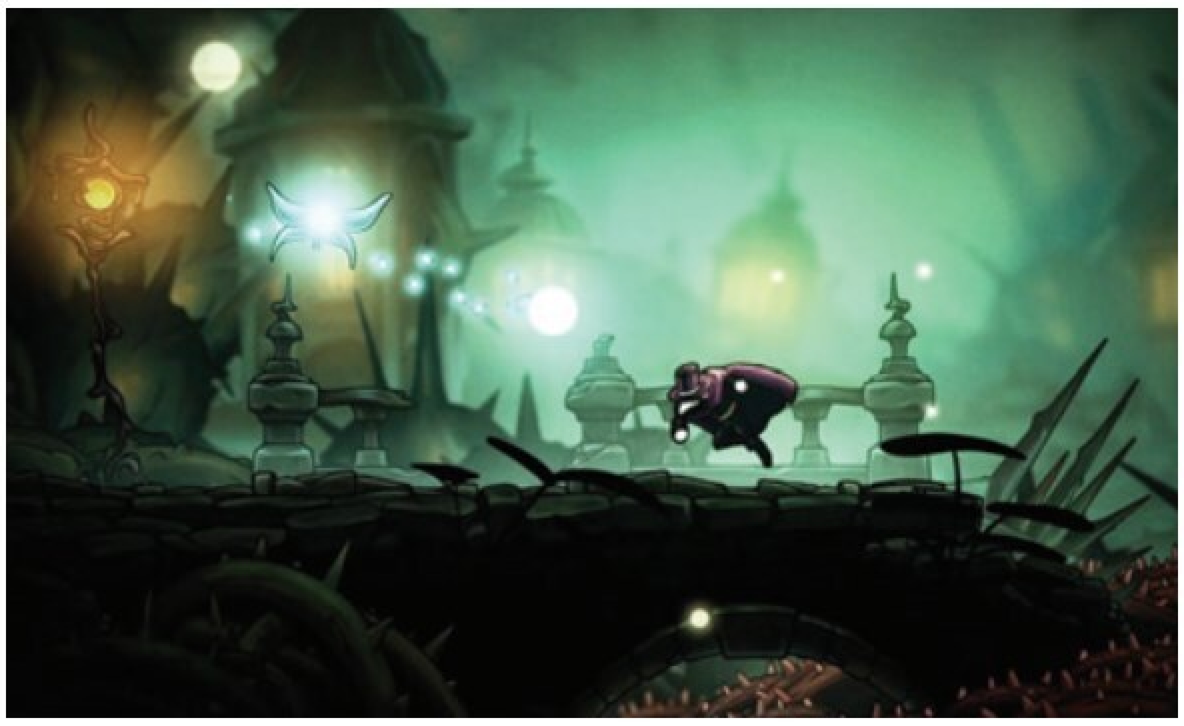
THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE

With an art style that would feel at home with 2010s Cartoon Network animation and plenty of humor in its recent reveal trailer, Thank Goodness You're Here has our attention. Dubbed a "comedy slapformer" by its developer, players complete odd jobs and leave their mark on the strange town of Barnsworth. The more they finish, the more the town opens up, yielding opportunities for even weirder tasks. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Panic Inc. **DEVELOPER** Coal Supper **RELEASE** 2024

CROWSWORN

Hollow Knight's success made it clear there is a huge demand for moody, exploration platformers with tight melee combat. Developer Mongoose Rodeo is happy to answer the call with a successful Kickstarter that raised over $1.2 million, absolutely destroying its $125,000 goal. In the game, you explore the formerly vibrant Fearanndal as a character wearing a plague doctor mask who carries a scythe, and many other weapons. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

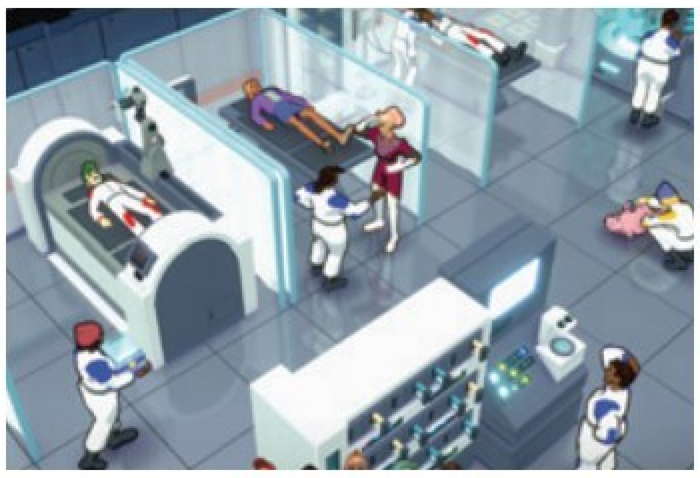


PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Mongoose Rodeo
DEVELOPER Mongoose Rodeo **RELEASE** TBA

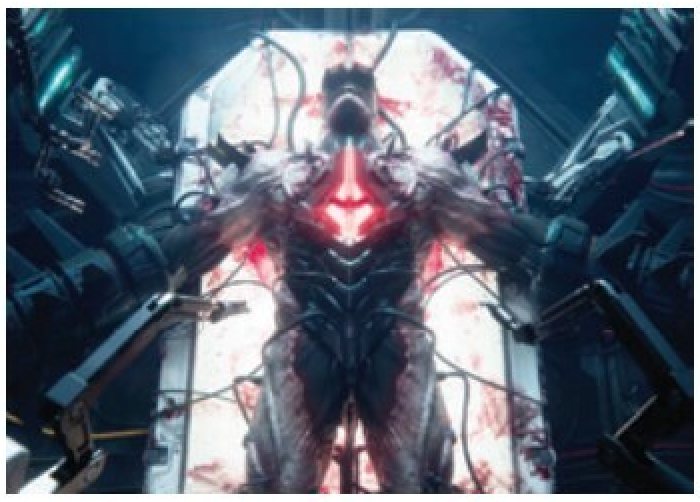
JUMPLIGHT ODYSSEY

Currently building its audience in early access on Steam, Jumplight Odyssey seeks to deliver the *Star Trek* captain experience by putting you in charge of a spaceship on a journey to the Forever Star. You have to contend with ship maintenance, saving survivors, aggressive aliens, and general crew morale as you explore the cosmos. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER League of Geeks
DEVELOPER League of Geeks **RELEASE** TBA



KILLING FLOOR III



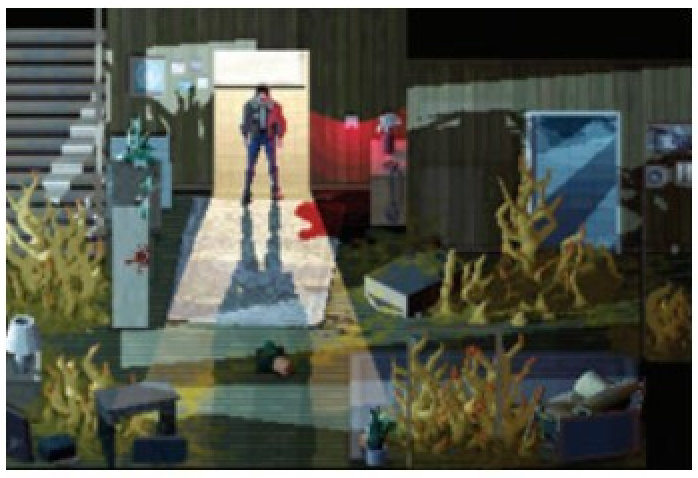
Killing Floor is back for a third installment of gory, nightmarish cooperative FPS action in Killing Floor III. In 2091, megacorp Horzine bioengineers horrific monsters called zed. As part of the rebel group Nightfall, it's up to you and five other players on a team to take them all down and save humanity. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 6-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Tripwire Interactive
DEVELOPER Tripwire Interactive **RELEASE** TBA

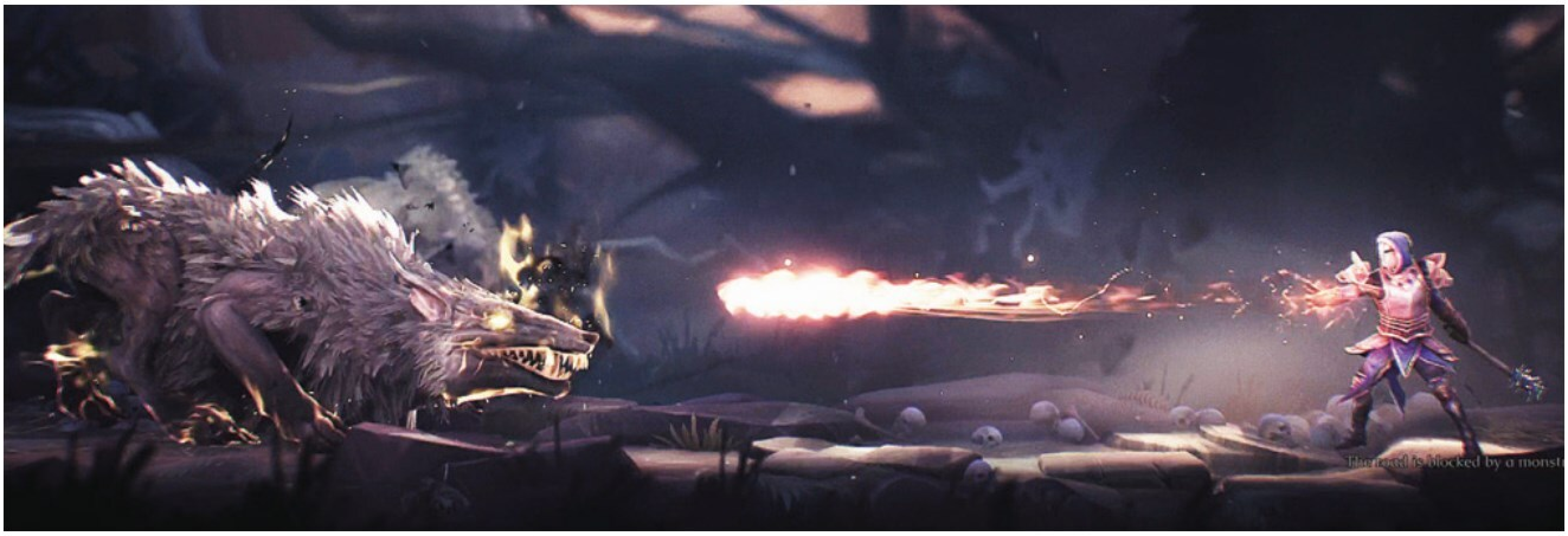
HOLSTIN

Set in Poland in 1992, Holstin is a pixelated survivor horror game about a small town overtaken by some kind of strange darkness. Exploration takes place from an isometric perspective, but for combat, you move behind the protagonist's shoulder for third-person shooting. To see the visuals in action is both impressive and unsettling. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sonka
DEVELOPER Sonka **RELEASE** TBA



MANDRAGORA



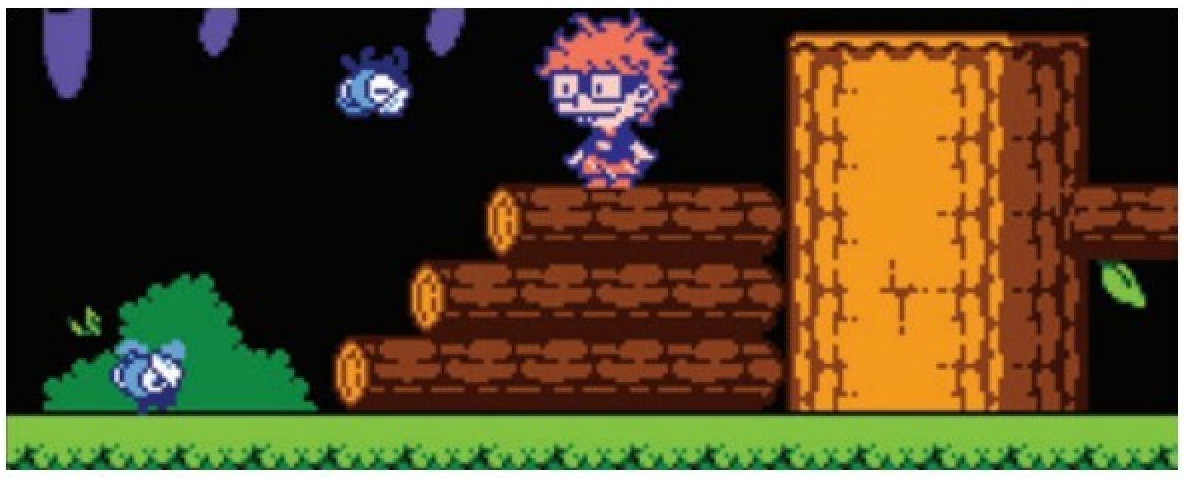
In Faelduum, a dark medieval world, humanity has surrendered to a plague of monsters, but there are warriors willing to fight back and you're one of them. The structure and combat will be familiar to any Souls fan, but this is a 2D game with an attractive painterly art style. Our hands-on time with the game impressed us, even if the opening Warg boss fight showed us the "You Are Dead" screen more times than we care to admit. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Marvelous
DEVELOPER Primal Game Studio **RELEASE** 2024

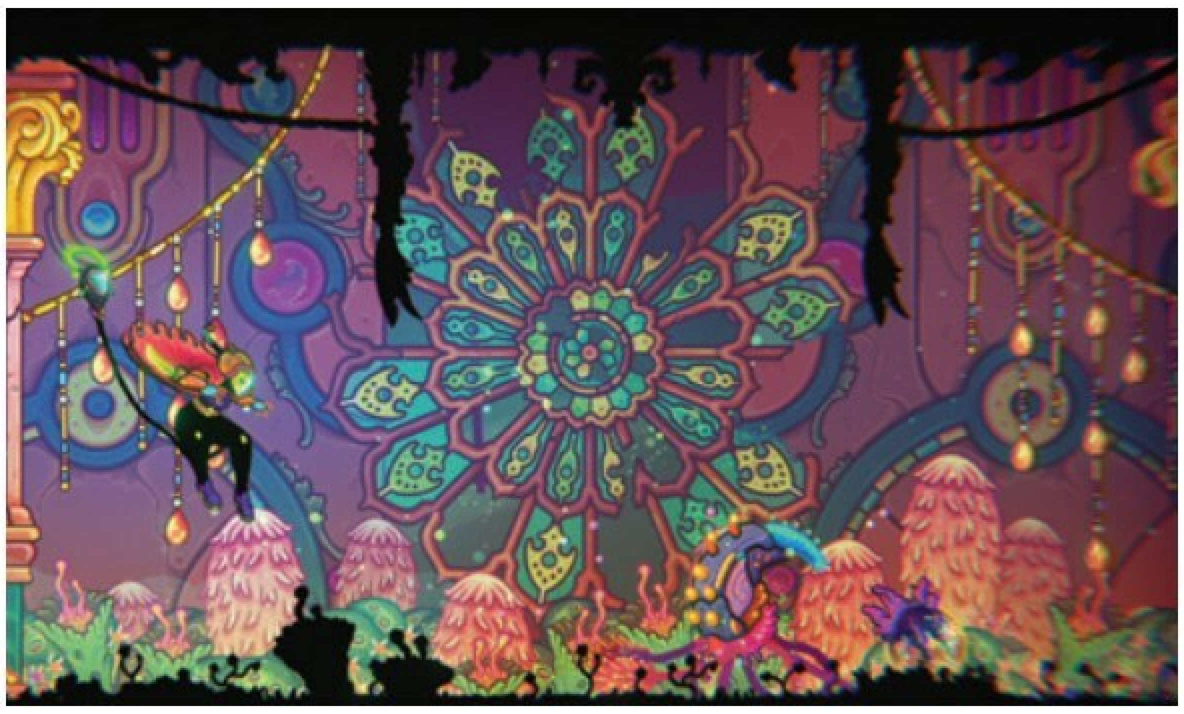
RUGRATS: ADVENTURES IN GAMELAND

As the screenshot demonstrates, Rugrats: Adventures in Gameland is an homage to the 8-bit platformers of years gone by. However, unlike many nostalgic releases, this new *Rugrats* title is actually receiving a playable NES cartridge via Limited Run Games; in fact, my hands-on demo took place on an NES console. The version arriving on current platforms even has an HD mode that lets you apply modern visuals that look like the original cartoon. With solid platforming mechanics, two-player co-op, and nods to the cartoon, Rugrats: Adventures in Gameland seems like one to watch for '90s kids. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • NES
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** The MIX Games
DEVELOPER Wallride **RELEASE** 2024



ULTROS



Metroid-inspired platformers are common in the world of indie games and you won't hear me complain about it. I enjoy the genre, but it does take something special to stand out against the competition. Ultros' strategy is to create a psychedelic world brimming with color that is all about exploring a living, growing world. It will take hands-on to find out if it's fun to play, but we're already enamored with the look. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Hadoque **DEVELOPER** Hadoque **RELEASE** 2024

Reviews

spotlight

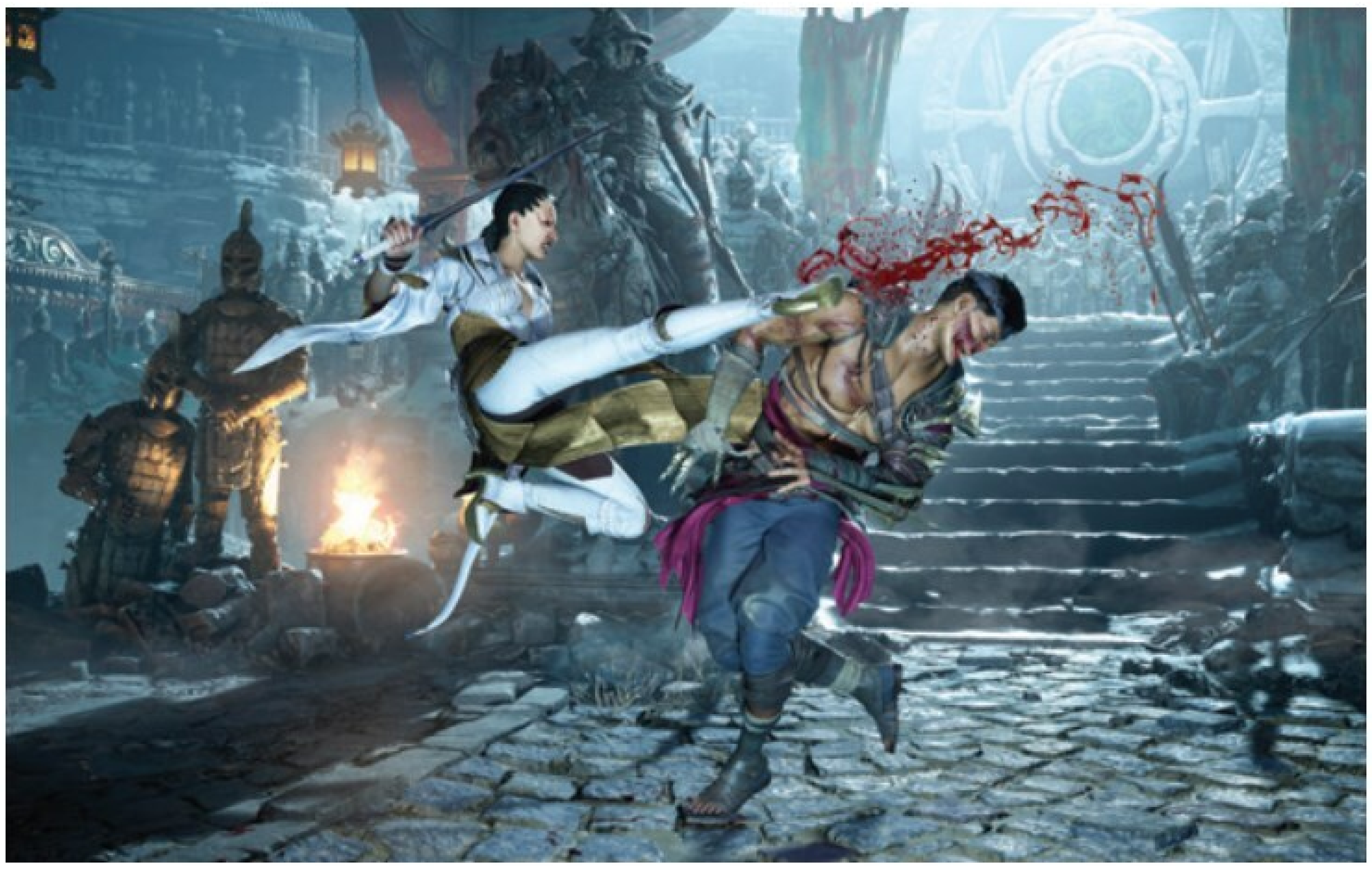
72 MORTAL KOMBAT 1 // **74** CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY // **75** LIES OF P
76 STARFIELD // **78** NBA 2K24 // **79** COCOON // **79** BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK // **79** WRESTLEQUEST

For more information on our scoring system, visit GameInformer.com/Scoring
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews

GI MUST PLAY

MORTAL KOMBAT 1

Gory glory



Following the apocalyptic events of Mortal Kombat 11 and its story-based expansion, Mortal Kombat 1 represents a new era for the franchise's characters. While it purports to do the same for the video game series, the more I played Mortal Kombat 1, the more familiar the latest entry felt, but that's far from a bad thing.

Mortal Kombat 1 brings the tight gameplay of its predecessors to the next level. Every punch, kick, throw, and special move feels impactful in the dances of death in which its characters participate. Once you get a few fights under your belt with your character of choice, the gameplay really starts to sing as you learn how to chain together combos, specials, and this entry's new addition, Kameo Fighters.

After selecting your fighter, you choose a secondary character to back you up. These Kameo Fighters have distinct moves that attack your opponent, shield you from incoming attacks, or disrupt the flow of battle. I love using an aggressive strategy with Sub-Zero, getting in their face with a diverse attack plan, only to use Scorpion as a Kameo Fighter to pull me out of danger with his spear. I took great delight in experimenting with different strategies and Kameo combinations to maximize this new mechanic.

The main roster consists of various franchise favorites, many of whom bring unique styles and tactics. Bruisers like General Shao and Geras can spell trouble for players with difficulty managing distance, but I prefer more agile characters like Kitana and Li Mei. Add in series icons like Liu Kang, Mileena, and Johnny Cage, all with excellent iterations on their character designs and move sets, and this is one of the strongest starting rosters of the series. It's just a shame that one of the main characters in the story, Shang Tsung, is locked as preorder DLC.

Mortal Kombat 1's story plays out like a movie. NetherRealm has gotten much better at weaving the fights into the narrative rather than inserting jarring moments that only exist to set up fights. The story's production values are among the elite in the games industry, with state-of-the-art facial animations and some of the best cutscene fight choreography ever seen in the medium. I had a blast following the narrative of Liu Kang's attempts to keep his new timeline in order, even if the – albeit extremely fun – conclusion gets rather messy.

Once you finish the hours-long story, single-player content aplenty awaits. Invasions mode allows you to embark on a quest across the realms, completing various challenges for a ton of in-game rewards. These creative tests range from straightforward fights and difficult multi-phase boss battles to obstacle-dodging survival trials and Test-Your-Might encounters. While I love this mode and its promise of delivering nine hours of single-player content every six weeks, the formula wore on me a little as I progressed. Still, I loved ending my nights by playing through a dozen or so nodes to see what challenges awaited me and what cosmetic customization items I could earn to equip my fighters.

On the more traditional front, Mortal Kombat 1 brings back single-player arcade-style Towers and a small suite of online modes. While King of the Hill provides too much downtime as you watch strangers duke it out, I loved putting my skills to the test in the ranked best-of-five matches in the online Kombat League. Story and Invasions will always be my destination modes, but getting to know another player over a three-to-five fight series builds unmatched tension and delivers some of my most memorable moments with Mortal Kombat 1.

When the first Mortal Kombat debuted more than 30 years ago, the series quickly became known for its trademark blood, gore, and violence. While that is still at the forefront thanks to Mortal Kombat 1's Fatal Blows, Brutalities, and, of course, Fatalities, the longer the series has gone on, the longer it has rightfully become just as known for its genre-leading approach to single-player content and incredibly tight fighting mechanics. In making strides in both areas, Mortal Kombat 1 moves the series forward to continue what has already been a terrific year for the genre. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER NetherRealm Studios **RELEASE** September 19 **RATING** M

CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

So long, Night City

Since its disastrous launch in 2020, developer CD Projekt Red has delivered critical updates to the game to align it more closely to the original vision, but Phantom Liberty, coupled with the free Update 2.0, is its biggest yet. This new expansion trades in the high-octane mercenary vibes of Cyberpunk 2077 for a more subdued spy thriller, and it's a well-made trove of new ways to experience Night City. A few twists and turns, narratively and mechanically, make Phantom Liberty feel unique within the broader swath of stories to experience in Cyberpunk 2077. Despite all that, the new ending to V's journey that Phantom Liberty adds steals the show, distilling the essence of the cyberpunk sci-fi genre into an emotionally charged message of what it means to exist in this dystopia.

After Rosalind Myers, president of the New United States of America, crash lands in Night City's Dogtown, V is contacted by netrunner Songbird to save her. Doing so won't be easy as Dogtown is controlled by Kurt Hansen, a former NUSA colonel with ties to Myers and her operation, and his private army. It doesn't take long for the expansion's spy web to be spun.

This web brings the twists, turns, and surprises I expected out of a spy thriller, and while I was rarely caught completely off guard, I still enjoyed following its various paths. But the enjoyment I got out of Phantom Liberty's narrative was less about the actual beats and more about how those beats turned Cyberpunk 2077's gameplay on its head. Phantom Liberty doesn't force any gameplay approach on you, but it heavily nudges you into stealth and reinforces that with various new weapons and mechanics.

I enjoyed Phantom Liberty's new gigs and jobs, whether securing airdropped packages filled with valuable loot, delivering a car across town, or engaging with some of Night City's eccentric residents throughout various side missions. That all of this, and most of the main story, is housed within the new Dogtown district, which mixes Vegas-esque cheap luxury with vertical slums, is another plus.

The highlight of my time with Phantom Liberty arrived as a new extended ending to V's narrative in Cyberpunk 2077. Getting to this ending forced me to take Phantom Liberty's story in a direction I didn't like, but what awaited me was worth it and then some, packing an excellent narrative punch to the story of this expansion and the base game. It's reflective, both heartfelt and heartbreaking, and an excellent distillation of why the cyberpunk genre exists in the first place.

Phantom Liberty succeeds as another 20 hours of great adventure in Night City and, coupled with Cyberpunk 2077's new Update 2.0, a culmination of three years of hard work. From a disastrous launch in 2020 to now, CDPR has finally made good on the promise of this futuristic, dystopian RPG. While Phantom Liberty doesn't stand head and shoulders above the rest of the Cyberpunk package, it slots in nicely, like a preem piece of cyberware you've been waiting to be in stock. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

UPDATE 2.0

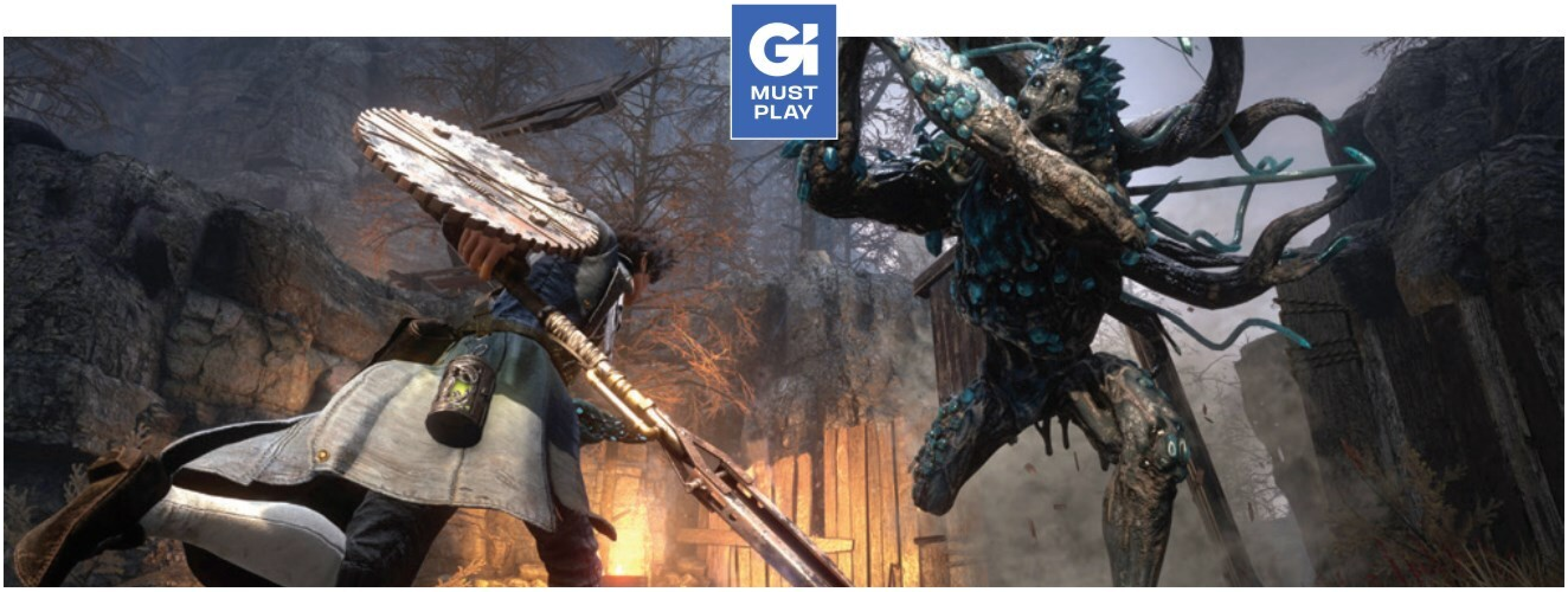
Update 2.0 is a free update for new-gen consoles and PC that includes revamped cyberware, redesigned skill trees and perks, combat and vehicle improvements, new radio stations, and more. It's separate from the paid Phantom Liberty expansion, which features the new spy thriller story, Dogtown, more than 100 new weapons, cars, cyberware, and fashion pieces, and an increased level cap amongst other things. Because both are on new-gen and PC consoles only, I found performance to be mostly great, with a few frame rate hiccups here and there. Overall, Update 2.0 is an impressive rework of a three-year-old game and couples perfectly with Phantom Liberty.

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER CD Projekt **DEVELOPER** CD Projekt Red **RELEASE** September 26 **RATING** M

LIES OF P

Master of puppets



Lies of P developer Neowiz proudly calls its *The Adventures of Pinocchio*-inspired action game a Soulslike, drawing direct attention to its From Software inspiration. The proclamation is a risky move. While there are great contenders in this subgenre, even the best are a few marks from what From Software creates, and I went into Lies of P with that expectation. But then I put 40 hours into it in just five days. And then I doubled back on a save to get a different ending. And then I started New Game Plus because I wanted more. Lies of P masterfully wields familiar Soulslike combat and worldbuilding and infuses it with a few twists to set it apart from its various inspirations. The result is a pondering and memorable exploration of a fairytale everyone knows built within a deeply rewarding action game.

Neowiz looked beyond Pinocchio as a shock value for a character. It uses a puppet we're all familiar with to tell a story of an overworked, undervalued class rising against its creators, how far those creators will go to remain in power, and, as you might expect, what it means to be a human (and there's a confusing but interesting mechanic to go with that I won't spoil here). It's not necessarily new ground, nor is it necessarily all that deep, but spinning the tale of Pinnochio into everything Lies of P encompasses is commendable. And it works, especially within the confines of a Soulslike.

Every enemy has the potential to kill you with a few missteps, bosses surprise and enrage you, and mechanics won't make sense... until they do. Anyone familiar with Soulslikes knows what's going on here, but after Lies of P introduces its various parts, like element-infusing Legion Arms and Grindstones, the whole becomes realized.

Save for a few areas, Lies of P is gorgeous and unique, brimming with the energy of industry in the puppet infested Krat, its surrounding regions, and the Krat Hotel hub that serves as the base of operations, filled with NPCs, shopkeeps, a mysterious girl responsible for leveling Pinnochio up, and more. The expected highlights are there, too: a once beautiful city ravaged by plague, a gothic cathedral home to horrors, a World Fair-esque exhibition, and more, all connected through revelatory shortcuts.

Even when Soulslikes excel at creating an exciting world and great-feeling combat, it's often the bosses where the seams show, but that's not the case in Lies of P. Most are highly memorable both in design and how they were seemingly in my head, calling my moves before I even pressed a button.

Like the best action games, Lies of P rewards you each time you veer off the main path and for subsequent combat encounters. You'll get items to upgrade Pinnochio, various cosmetic costumes, helpful consumables and throwables, and more. My time rarely felt wasted.

Lies of P's greatest strength is how it rewards and empowers you at every turn to venture further through this twisted tale of puppetry and monstrous humanity despite its oppressive world and formidable enemies. I struggled to pull myself away, even when it had me fuming. It delicately balances the fun of a Soulslike with the challenge the genre demands and only falters a few times. That it maintains that balance within the confines of a fairytale most know best because of Disney is another achievement. But above all that, Lies of P uses the familiar, the highlights, and the lessons learned from the authors of the Soulslike subgenre to create something unique, fascinating, and exhilarating. Neowiz aimed for the stars, much like the ones its Pinnochio wishes upon, and hits them with machine-like accuracy. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC • Mac **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Neowiz
DEVELOPER Neowiz **RELEASE** September 19 **RATING** M

STARFIELD

Overwhelming scope

Even in the increasingly crowded marketplace of big, expansive games, Starfield stands out. Leveraging the gameplay Bethesda popularized with The Elder Scrolls and Fallout games, Starfield expands the breadth of exploration to a galaxy of solar systems, planets, and ships. It populates those environments with a rich palette of activities and missions that tap into the outer space fantasy. It's a staggering span of content to wrap one's head around. At times, that scope threatens to impair the focus and pacing, and moment-to-moment gameplay is not always a strong suit. But players can expect to uncover hundreds of hours of experimentation in a richly imagined sci-fi playground, and that thrill is worth experiencing.

Your crafted character begins life as a space miner who inexplicably connects with an inscrutable buried artifact, granting visions of a grand cosmic mystery. That foundational event puts you in contact with a tightly-knit group of explorers working to decipher the secret. The introduction opens the door to your adventures across a vast network of human colony worlds that has sprung up after an exodus from Earth.

Character dialogue and storytelling is top-notch, with novel personalities and interactions every step of the way. The mostly independent storylines of different factions, corporations, and companions each tap into different sci-fi tropes, from being hunted by a monstrous xenoweapon alien to infiltrating a pirate fleet to being a frontier lawman on the fringes of known space. The variety of these experiences keeps things fresh, especially when you layer in additional emergent opportunities, like setting up mining outposts, surveying planets, buying and decorating a home, or pursuing a romance with one of your companions.

Starfield is a game of endless distractions, where new mission threads and activities are constantly beckoning. I found the most enjoyment when I allowed those threads to pull me to and fro, creating a web of interactions I could flip between as I saw fit. Some activities, like visiting alien temples, hunting down merc ships, or clearing out bases of outlaws, can start to feel repetitive if taken on without a break to do other things. I also grew frustrated at the frequent ping-ponging between mission givers and destinations; even with fast travel, it felt especially egregious to be flying to an entirely different star system only to fly back to tell someone what I saw there. Nonetheless, several mission moments are standout and memorable, like a research lab shifting between different states of reality or a corporate espionage exchange in the back room of a dance club. In its best moments, I was immersed in Starfield's unfolding tale.

The joy of exploration is a core tenet of play, and nailing that sensation is central to Starfield's success. I loved landing on a new planet and seeing unknown megafauna wandering the plains or entering a new city and finding the seediest dive bar. Arrive in a new system and dock with a derelict space station – who knows what's inside? Starfield is a story about both the good and the bad of humanity's desire to reach further and uncover what's just out of grasp, and I love that those themes weave into the flow of how players may approach the game. That engagement is only enhanced by the high quality of the presentation; this is an immaculate visual landscape filled with details juxtaposed against the grandeur of space, accentuated by a wistful, questing musical score that always nails the right mood.

I found navigating Starfield obtuse, both in moving around a giant map of stars and its U.I. and systems. Figuring out how to do basic tasks, like selling excess inventory, modifying my ship, adjusting crew assignments, or reaching a particular star system, often made me scratch my head. The constant need to enter menus to reach destinations hampers the sensation of seamless travel. I started to feel like it was a car dashboard where no button was where I expected it to be. But once I learned my way around, it was a vehicle that took me to some remarkable destinations.

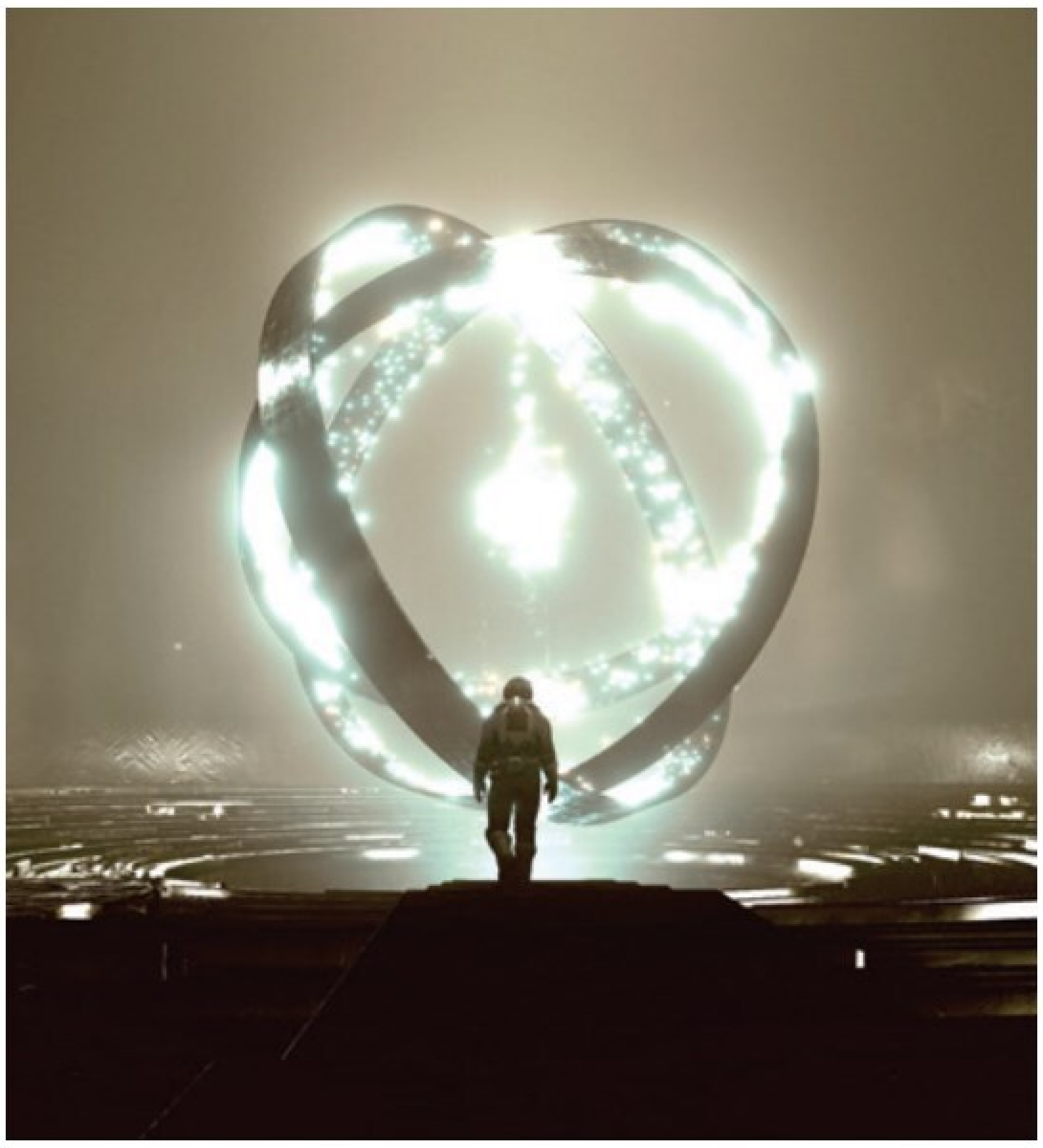
Ground combat is central to the experience, and most players are likely to spend a significant chunk of time with a gun in their hand, even if they try as I did, to lean into persuasion and stealth for many encounters. I enjoyed the diversity of weapons, from laser rifles to shotguns that seemed yanked out of an old Western. Traversal is thrilling thanks to the jet boost packs you can wear on your back to leap and mantle through environments quickly. But gunplay feels stiff and mechanical, and enemies pursue unwise pathing and positioning that rarely leads to real challenge or tension. Pulling out the big guns and laying waste to a base of baddies is entertaining, but the action itself left me cold.

Shipborne space combat also plays a big role, and I love having a chance to tap into that craving. But I rarely encountered battles that clicked. I completely wiped out the enemy forces in moments, or the ships arrayed against me were way out of my league – there was little in between.

It took me a long time to fall in love with Starfield, and even after I did, certain aspects didn't work for me. But the things I didn't enjoy are vastly outweighed by my enthusiasm for this new, original science fiction universe, the breadth of its adventures, and the appeal of its many interwoven stories. Go in with the expectation that it will take some time to find your footing in such a vast gameplay space, and there's a universe well worth discovering here. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.5

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Bethesda Game Studios **RELEASE** September 6 **RATING** M



NBA 2K24

A flagrant stepback

NBA 2K24 should have been the perfect platform to celebrate Kobe Bryant's career and his everlasting influence on the game of basketball. Instead, his legacy gets overshadowed by omnipresent microtransactions and stale game modes. As a result, NBA 2K24 feels like a dull, lopsided blowout as opposed to a memorable, adrenaline-inducing affair like the ones the Black Mamba often blessed us with throughout his career.

Unlike its more innovative predecessor, NBA 2K24 only introduces a handful of new elements, the most notable of which is ProPlay technology. Though the newly integrated feature does make each layup, dunk, and jump shot more realistic than ever, this aesthetic upgrade isn't enough to redeem what is essentially just a fresh coat of paint over a dated and unimaginative foundation. The lack of novel features became especially evident once I went through most of the recycled game modes offered within. Fortunately, NBA 2K24 still has a couple of enjoyable modes you can spend most of your time with, including my favorite, Mamba Moments.

Like NBA 2K23's Jordan Challenges, the latest commemorative offering lets you relive seven of Kobe's most iconic games. However, Mamba Moments doesn't take you back to the Laker legend's humble career beginnings. Instead, the first challenge you play through happens amid his electrifying career during the 2001 playoffs, five years after he was drafted. Though this opening challenge is undoubtedly an iconic event, I was disappointed by the omission of some of his most memorable, legacy-defining milestones. The exclusion of Kobe's 81-point outburst in 2006 against the Toronto Raptors is particularly baffling; this near-record-breaking occasion would have been a treat to recreate.

MyNBA Eras, the novel addition from NBA 2K23 that lets you relive specific periods in the league, returns, this time with a new supplementary offering in tow called MyNBA Lite. Though welcome, I was puzzled by the addition of this streamlined Eras mode as its inclusion is unnecessary and redundant. However, playing through different periods, from the Magic vs. Bird Era of the 1980s to the Modern Era of the 2020s, remains an entertaining experience as each one brings its own set of rules, teams, and players that ensure no two playthroughs are the same.

Yet no matter how enjoyable MyNBA Eras and Mamba Moments are, the high points I experienced with these modes were dwarfed by the dismay I felt upon entering NBA 2K24's MyCareer. If you're looking forward to going through a new rags-to-riches story in the latest single-player offering, then prepare to be disappointed as Visual Concepts has completely discarded any semblance of a coherent plot – a decision that confounds me since the single-player mode's dramatic underdog narrative has always been one of the elements I enjoyed most in past entries.

In addition, the road to becoming the NBA GOAT also becomes exponentially more problematic if you haven't amassed a mountain of Virtual Currency. As this is your primary method of progressing your player, you'll need to purchase copious amounts to rank up quickly since the quantity you earn after each MyCareer game isn't sufficient to grow meaningfully.

Like always, NBA 2K24's heavy emphasis on in-game currency and microtransactions isn't limited to MyCareer, as this necessity becomes even more pronounced in the ever-popular MyTeam mode. Like in past installments, you can always grind out new rare player cards instead of purchasing them outright. However, the time it takes to earn these upgrades often doesn't make any of it worth it in the long run.

Following the innovative and pleasantly surprising NBA 2K23, I expected Visual Concepts to build upon its success and introduce even more improvements with its latest entry in the long-running basketball series. But instead of mirroring the Black Mamba's gradual rise to permanent relevancy, NBA 2K24 sadly feels like a stop-gap – a quick hit to temporarily satisfy diehard fans. If this continues, the series could veer closer to a forgettable imitation of Kobe's signature move: a fadeaway into obscurity. **BY NICO VERGARA**

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K
DEVELOPER Visual Concepts **RELEASE** September 8 **RATING** E

KINGS
5:00
QTR 4
CLUTCHTIME

MUST PLAY

COCOON

I basically never had any idea why I was doing what I was doing or what the larger goal was, but I didn't mind for a moment because the puzzles scratch your brain so effectively that I was always eager to complete whatever strange task it put in front of me. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Geometric Interactive **RELEASE** September 29 **RATING** E

BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK

200
2 TRICK COMBO

There's room for games that want to recapture some old glory – to remind you how cool games used to be – but to do that, you have to add something new to the conversation. Bomb Rush isn't interested in adding anything new. It just wants to have the same Jet Set Radio conversations we've had for years. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Team Reptile **DEVELOPER** Team Reptile **RELEASE** August 18 (Switch, PC), September 1 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One) **RATING** T

WRESTLEQUEST

I was ready to love WrestleQuest, and some enjoyment can be found for those with the patience and fandom to fireman carry them along. But the imaginative ideas die by a thousand cuts that hold Muchacho Man and his friends back from world title contention. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

Toy Box Jimmy
Muchacho Man
HYPE METER

5.75

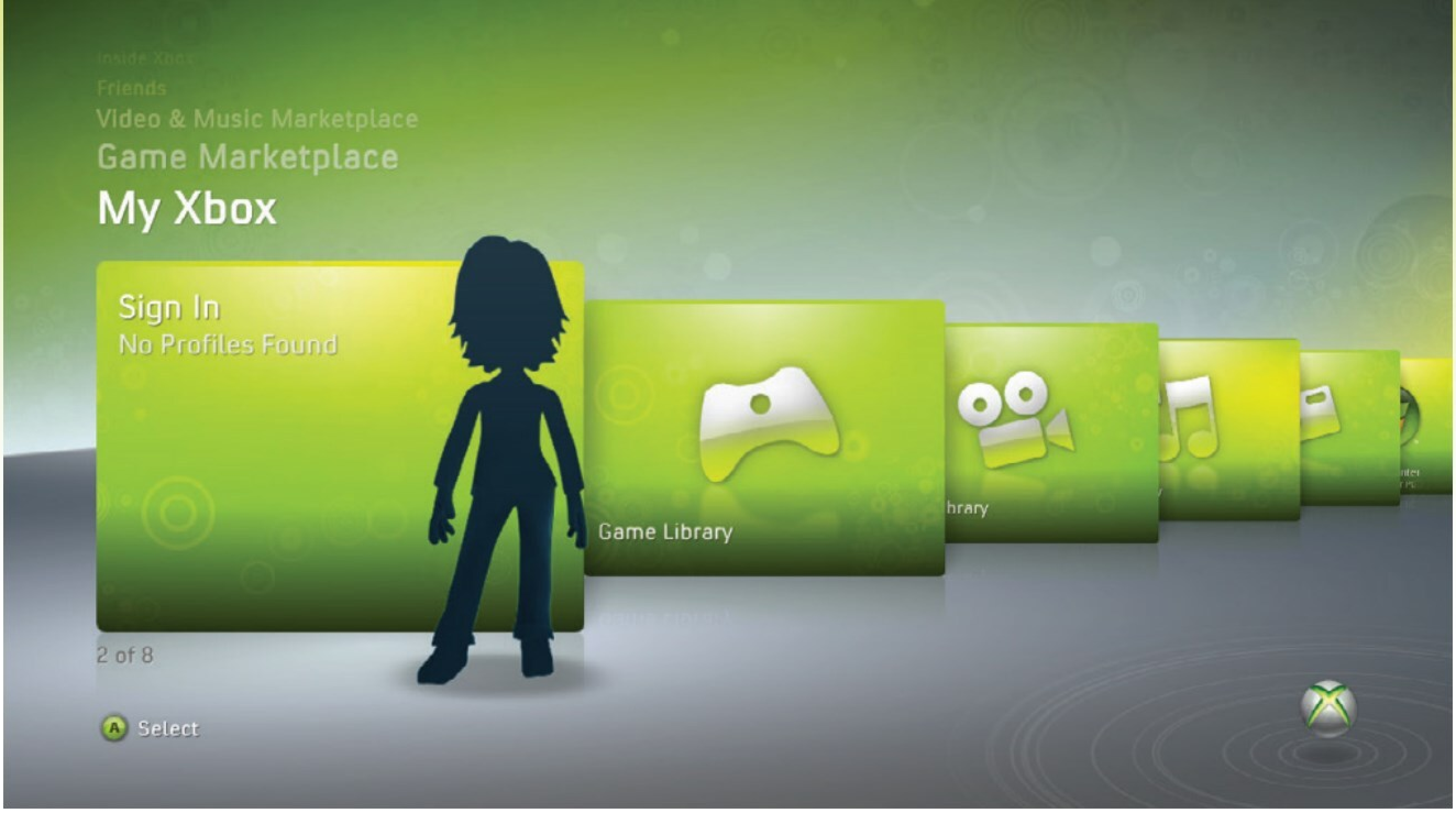
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Skybound Games **DEVELOPER** Mega Cat Studios **RELEASE** August 22 **RATING** E

A HIGHER DEGREE OF QUALITY

XBOX 360
XBOX 360

A look back on the Xbox 360, Microsoft's biggest gaming success

BY CHARLES HARTE



↘ Xbox's NXE dashboard (2008)

If you pay attention to the spine of your *Game Informer* magazine, you might notice we number every issue, and after 32 years, we've finally made it all the way to 360. What better way to celebrate than a retrospective on Microsoft's most successful console?

The Xbox 360 is, arguably, one of the most influential modern game consoles of all time. It marked an era in the gaming industry when Microsoft was at its peak, and no console the company has released since has surpassed the 360's lifetime sales of 85 million units. The console is remembered for huge leaps in hardware technology, its iconic library of games, its online integration, and its motion gaming experiment, the Kinect. The 360 tried a lot of new things, and while they didn't always pan out, they all left lasting effects on the industry.

Reinventing The Wheel

Aware of its competition with Sony and Nintendo, Microsoft made the decision to release the 360 in 2005, an entire year ahead of the next-gen hardware of its competitors. It worked to fabulous success, thanks in no small part to the innovation the company was able to pull off. Memory cards were a thing of the past – the 360 came with a removable hard drive, so you could bring *all* your data to a friend's console if you wanted. Wireless controllers existed in several forms before the 360, but this was the first time a wireless controller came packaged with the console.

It was even the first console to have a proper home menu – not just a screen to manage system settings and memory card data, but a shop, friends list, and customizable Gamer Cards for people who searched for your username. Over the years, the home screen would evolve several times, gain an avatar editor reminiscent of Nintendo's Miis, and eventually become unrecognizable from its first iteration. The 360 was also the first to implement a console-based achievement system, rewarding players with Gamerscore for doing things like completing missions or gathering collectibles.

Of course, the push to release the 360 well before the competition did have one speculated downside: the notorious red ring of death. The three red lights. This hardware defect earned its name thanks to the way the 360 communicated errors. Depending on the issue, a number of green lights around the power button would turn red, and in the case of the red ring of death, three red segments indicated a general hardware failure. It caused the console to stop working entirely and required thousands of consoles to be sent in for repairs. A common household myth at the time was that wrapping the system in towels would force a hard reset, but this trick was unreliable at best and a fire hazard at worst. Later models of the 360 fixed this issue, but the whole debacle left a notable stain on the console's legacy.

A Legendary Library

Arguably, the best impact of the 360 era is Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA) and its effect on indie games. While the arcade was technically introduced during the era of the original Xbox, it was only available with the use of a special disc. The 360 had the marketplace built into its menus at launch, so it was immediately more accessible. It marked the first time games could truly be developed and sold on consoles at a smaller scale. Every XBLA game came with a free demo, so you could get a taste of it before committing to a purchase. They were also much cheaper than the average game, with most titles sitting at $9.99 or below and almost none that broke the $19.99 mark.

It can't be overstated how important this shift was in bringing indie games to a mainstream audience. Some of the best games of the past generation debuted this way, and undeniably paved the way for games from smaller studios in the years that followed. Limbo, Braid, Castle Crashers, Super Meat Boy, Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, and Shadow Complex all made their way into the hands of console players thanks to the store. Now it's considered the norm, but the 360 is one of the biggest reasons the standard was established.

Of course, the games library of the 360 included more than just downloadable indie games. Halo 3 and Halo Reach are considered the peak of the series by many and stand out as notable console exclusives. The platform also birthed the Gears of War franchise, Forza Horizon, and the Crackdown series. The 360 also spent many years as the only console with Minecraft. Its dominance over the market meant the console was the go-to for many people to play third-party games, and from 2005 to 2013, some of the best games of all time were released. Bioshock, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Fallout 3 and Fallout: New Vegas, the entire Mass Effect Trilogy (which began as an Xbox 360 exclusive), seven Assassin's Creed games, nine Call of Duty games, and both Grand Theft Auto IV and V.

The era was defined by a general desire from gamers to be taken seriously, and for video games to be recognized by the world as "adult." Visually, triple-A titles from the era are overwhelmingly brown and grey, generally avoiding bright colors from the '90s and early '00s. Multiplayer was also smoother and more accessible than ever, so even big-budget single-player games like Assassin's Creed and Tomb Raider started incorporating online multiplayer modes on the side. And while expansions for games had existed for years, DLC began to exist in a more modern form; notoriously, 2006 was the year Oblivion's cosmetic horse armor became available to purchase.

Middle: Limbo
Bottom: Halo 3
↖

A Motion Commotion

Throughout the 360's lifespan, Microsoft released several new models, but its most significant hardware evolution was the motion-sensing camera, the Kinect. As the device's tagline suggests, when using a Kinect, "You are the controller," and the camera senses the position of your arms and legs to interact with a library of relatively casual games. It was released around the world in November of 2010, five years into the console's life cycle. After the Wii's massive success in the casual market, motion controls spent a few significant years as the biggest trend in gaming. Though Microsoft's attempt was never as successful as Nintendo's, the gimmick and novelty of controller-free gaming certainly turned heads at launch, selling 8 million units in the first 60 days.

Unfortunately for Microsoft, the fad would eventually fizzle out. While the device was largely well-received, Microsoft struggled to build an engaging library past its launch titles. And because the technology was so unique and the install base was relatively low compared to the base console, there was never much incentive for developers to invest significant time into games for the platform. Even after getting past that initial barrier of developing games that don't use a controller, the best-case scenario of a game's launch would still only earn a fraction of the profits it would have if released for the 360 using the traditional controller. Years later, Microsoft marketed an improved Kinect as a core part of the system's successor, the Xbox One, but after a disastrous E3 showing and a general lack of enthusiasm for motion-controlled gaming, the device was discontinued in 2017.

BABY
HAPPY
FUNKY
CRAZY
GOOD
GOOD
GOOD
XBOX 360
KINECT

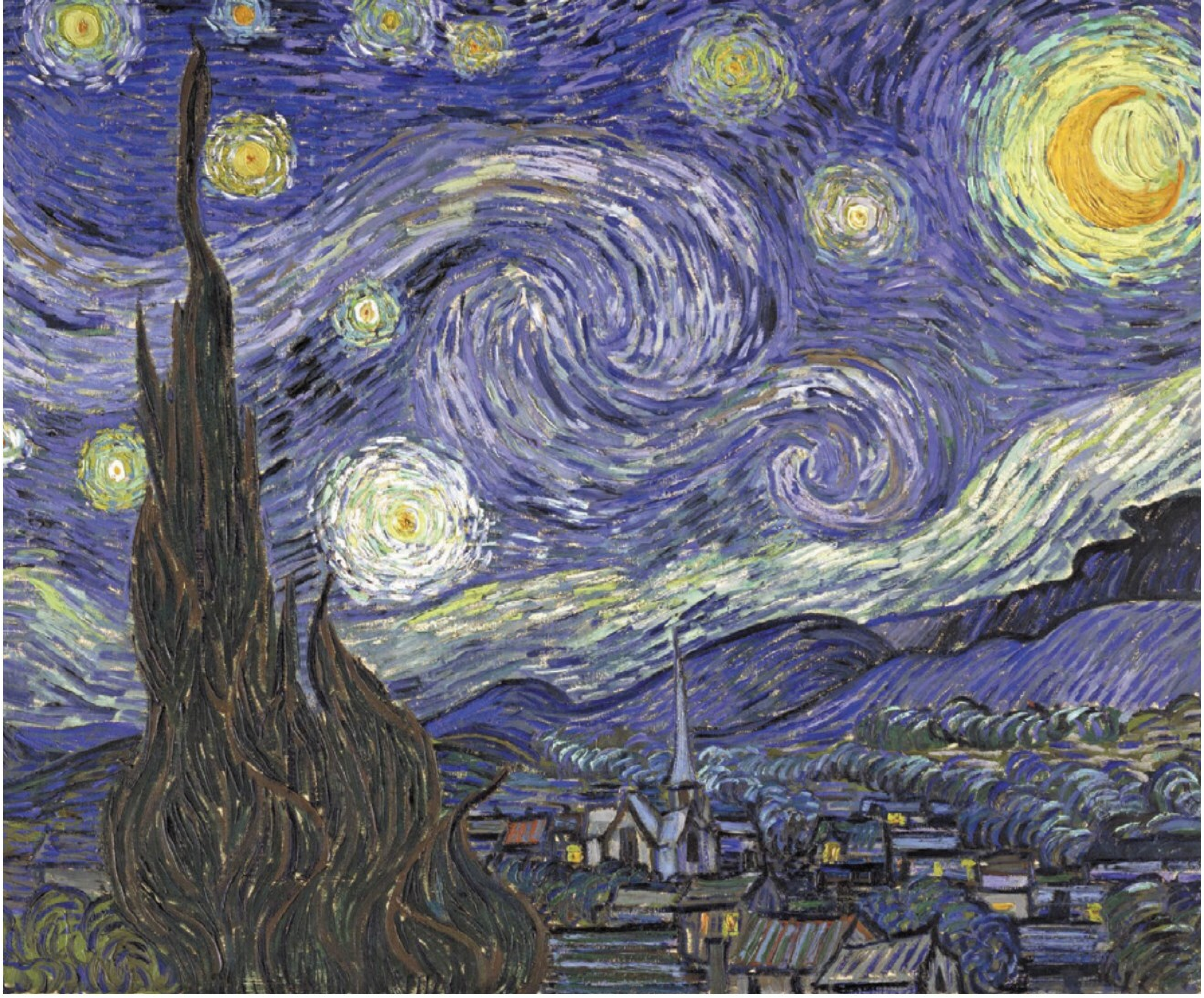
↘ Kinect with Just Dance 3 (2011)

Full Circle

The Kinect's failings aside, the 360 is remembered fondly, and not just as a wonderful piece of hardware – it was a trailblazer, setting standards for console gaming that are still present to this day. At nearly eighteen years old, if the 360 was a person, it would be old enough to start its senior year of high school right around now. It's been a while since it came into our lives, but we'll never forget those early days.

And on another note, thanks for supporting *Game Informer* for a whopping 360 issues. If you like this piece, we've got more retrospectives just around the corner: Join us 2,240 issues from now to see our retrospective on the Atari 2600. ■

Call of Duty 2 ↗



ONE LAST THING

WHAT HAPPENED THE YEAR NINTENDO WAS FOUNDED

TODAY, NINTENDO IS KNOWN AS *THE* VIDEO GAME COMPANY. It brought Mario, Link, Kirby, Nintendo Switches, and plenty more into our lives, but that was not its starting line. Nintendo was officially founded 133 years ago in 1889 as a playing card company. To put that into perspective, here are a few other things that happened the same year. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

- Vincent van Gogh painted arguably his most famous work, *The Starry Night* (pictured above)
- The Eiffel Tower was inaugurated. At the time, it was the tallest structure in the world
- The Pemberton Medicine Company was incorporated, changing to the Coca-Cola Company three years later
- The very first issue of *The Wall Street Journal* was published in New York City
- North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington were admitted as U.S. states by President Grover Cleveland
- The very first jukebox went into operation in a saloon in San Francisco
- Charlie Chaplin was born ■

GI PODCASTS

SUBSCRIBE ON SPOTIFY | APPLE PODCASTS | GOOGLE PODCASTS

TURN BACK TIME

What was your first?

RELIVE YOUR GREATEST GAMING MEMORIES WITH ALL THINGS NINTENDO

Join host Brian Shea as he brings you all the biggest games, news, and topics surrounding the most beloved name in gaming. **NEW EPISODES EVERY FRIDAY**

GameInformer.com/Podcasts

SUPER
MARIO BROS.™
WONDER